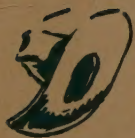


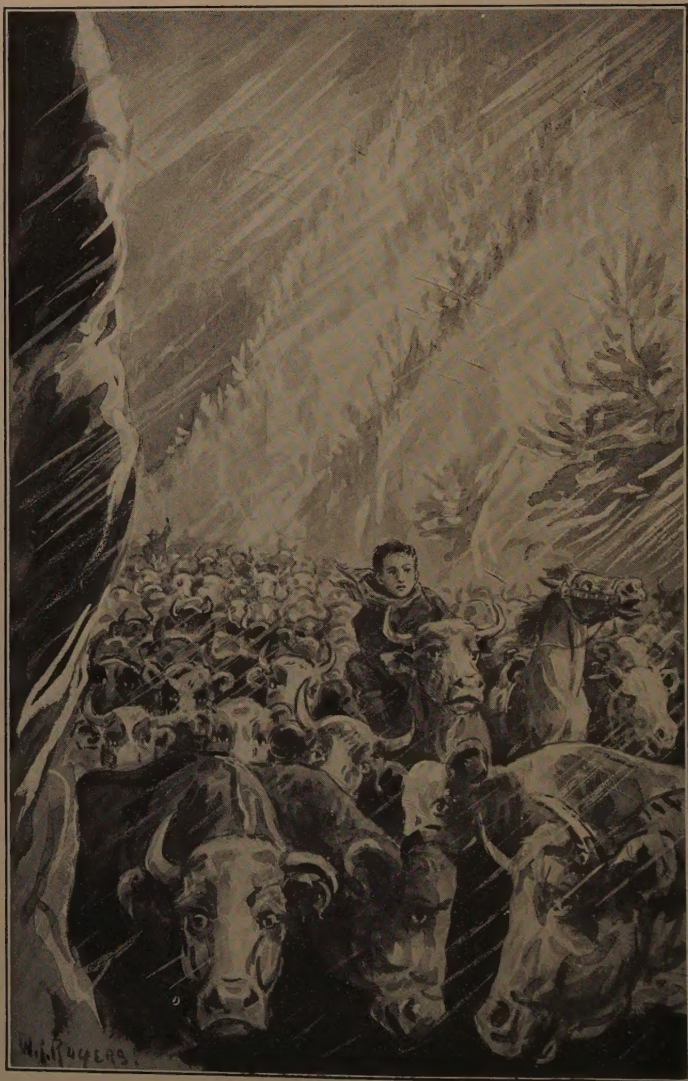




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TEDDY WAS HAVING ALL HE COULD DO TO KEEP ON
THE BACK OF THE STEER.

The X Bar X Boys at Grizzly Pass.

Frontispiece (Page 151)

THE X BAR X BOYS AT GRIZZLY PASS

BY

JAMES CODY FERRIS

AUTHOR OF "THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH,"
"THE X BAR X BOYS AT RUSTLERS' GAP," ETC.

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WESTERN STORIES FOR BOYS

By JAMES CODY FERRIS

THE X BAR X BOYS BOOKS

THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH
THE X BAR X BOYS IN THUNDER CANYON
THE X BAR X BOYS ON WHIRLPOOL RIVER
THE X BAR X BOYS ON BIG BISON TRAIL
THE X BAR X BOYS AT THE ROUND-UP
THE X BAR X BOYS AT NUGGET CAMP
THE X BAR X BOYS AT RUSTLERS' GAP
THE X BAR X BOYS AT GRIZZLY PASS

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The X Bar X Boys at Grizzly Pass

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THE X BAR X BOYS AT GRIZZLY PASS

CHAPTER I

CAUGHT IN A BLIZZARD

“Looks as if we were in for some snow-storm,” remarked Roy Manley to his brother Teddy.

The boys were on their favorite mounts, Star and Flash, riding along a high mountain trail. They had been inspecting cattle at a distant range where the cropping was still good. This was several miles from the X Bar X Ranch, which was owned by their father, Bardwell Manley, and they had just started for home.

Teddy reined in his pony and looked anxiously at the grey-white clouds that were piling up and looked like mountains of snow.

“You’ve said it, Roy!” he exclaimed. “Wouldn’t be surprised if the first storm of the winter would be a lallapoloosa. It’s starting in just right.”

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For an hour there had been a thin drizzle of rain, which had now turned to snow. Down it came, faster and faster. The wind blew in fitful gusts that whirled the flakes sharply into the faces of the two boys, almost blinding them and making it difficult to see the narrow trail ahead.

"Dad looks for a hard winter," went on Roy, as he patted Star's neck and urged the pony forward. "Too bad, with so many cattle on hand. But Dad thought he'd better hold some of them over until prices went up."

"Well," answered Teddy slowly, "it's all in a lifetime, I suppose. Go ahead, Roy, and I'll follow. Wow!" he exclaimed, as the rising wind blew the curtain of snow more closely around them. "It's going to be some storm, sure enough!"

The trail led down the mountainside toward the canyon below. It was a series of windings and twistings around gigantic boulders, through a forest of pines, hemlocks and oaks, many of which had low, overhanging branches which made riding dangerous, especially in the drifting snow.

"Hang on to Star's tail!" shouted Roy, as his pony turned sharply around a huge rock and was lost to Teddy's view.

"You bet!"

But Teddy Manley's voice was lost in the roar of the storm. The boy leaned over the

neck of the bronco, but found it difficult to see the trail; so he gave Flash his head, knowing that the pony was surefooted and that his instinct would keep him in the path, if such a thing was possible.

Roy was out of sight and hearing. Teddy felt as much alone as if he were on the mountain trail by himself. He was excited and began to hum a tune that he had heard Belle Ada, his young sister, play on the piano the evening before at the ranch house.

Faster and thicker came the snow. Louder and higher shrieked the wind, as it whipped the flakes into fantastic shapes that seemed to Teddy to be pushing against him and trying to keep him from going forward.

Suddenly, something gripped him by both arms so tightly that he could not move. He was lifted from the saddle and held fast while Flash walked out from under him and left him dangling in mid-air. Teddy could hear the pony as it clattered down the trail, the sound quickly growing fainter and fainter.

It had happened so unexpectedly that for a minute Teddy Manley was bewildered. Those viselike arms that had come from out of the storm clutched and held his own so tightly that he could not move. He struggled wildly, but it only made matters worse. With each movement the pain of his pinioned arms increased, and he grew still.

He knew now what had happened. He had ridden into the forked branches of an overhanging limb that had clutched him and lifted him from the saddle. In the storm he had not seen them. Now they held him tight, several feet above the ground.

"Roy!" he shouted loudly. "Roy! Come back here! I'm stuck!"

Even as he called, Teddy realized that Roy was far away. Flash, too, had gone on. If he were to be released, he must do it himself.

Twisting and turning, Teddy Manley tried to squirm out of the clutch of those wooden hands, but could not. The wind blew the snow into his face until he could hardly breathe. He choked and gasped, and for a moment closed his eyes as the icy particles stung them sharply. Then he opened them again and tried to see just how he had been caught.

The branches that held him came from a limb of a low-growing oak. If he could only climb up farther and get to the trunk of the tree, he might be able to get down. But the harder he tried, the tighter the branches held him. There was only one way of escape, and that was to break off the limb. Teddy's heart sank, for he realized that an oak branch was hard to break unless there was some rotten place in it.

"Roy! Hurry, Roy! I can't stand this much longer!"

Teddy knew that Roy could not hear, but somehow the sound of his own voice gave him courage. He began to swing the limb up and down. Each time he moved, the pressure on his arms hurt him so that he cried out in pain. But it must be done.

Up and down he swung. The limb creaked and groaned and seemed about to break, then righted itself again, and held firm.

Teddy tried once more. Down and up, up and down, never minding the pain, until at last he heard a cracking and the limb trembled. He gave another swing, higher than before. There was a splintering, a crash, and the boy hurtled to the ground. His head hit the frozen earth, and for a few minutes Teddy Manley knew nothing.

Presently the lad felt a soft, wet nose upon his face. He opened his eyes to see Flash standing over him. A big, white object, covered from head to foot with snow, was climbing up the trail.

“Roy!”

“Are you hurt much, Ted? I found you weren’t following, so I turned back. Then I met Flash, running loose, and I knew that something was wrong. Is it bad, Ted?”

“I’m all right. Just knocked out a little by the fall. Rub my arms, Roy. Gosh, they’re sore!”

“What happened?” Roy was anxious to

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know. Teddy told him quickly, and then, as he felt better, the two boys mounted again and started down the trail, making their way along slowly in the drifting snow.

"Gosh, that was some hug!" exclaimed Teddy, as they rode along. "Worse than a bear could give, I'll bet. Tightest hug I ever did have."

Roy's eyes twinkled.

"Harder than the one Curly gave you the other day?" he bantered. "Some hugger Curly is, too, Ted?"

"Didn't hug me at all," snapped Teddy, his face flushing. "I was helping her off the bronco and she almost fell, so I caught her, that's all there was to it."

"Oh, that's how it happened! Glad to know just how it was. But she needn't have given you a half-Nelson, seems to me."

Ethel Carew, or Curly as the boys called her because of her wavy locks, with her friend, Nell Willis, both from New York City, were staying with Mr. and Mrs. Ball at the 8 X 8 Ranch, a few miles from the X Bar X. The girls were frequent visitors at the Manleys, and had become great friends with the boys. Roy never allowed an opportunity to pass when he could tease his brother about the curly-haired Ethel.

"Is that so?" Teddy was always quick to come back. "Guess you needn't say anything,

Mr. Smarty. What were you and Nell doing in the kitchen yesterday? When you came out your arms were all over flour."

"Oh, she wasn't hugging me," replied Roy, trying to speak in a casual tone and failing in the attempt. "She was making cookies and said I bothered her; so she pushed me away with her floury hands."

Teddy grinned.

"Guess we're even now. But we've got to hurry. We shan't get back to the ranch to-night at this rate."

"We can't hurry in this storm," said Roy, buttoning his slicker more tightly around his neck. "But we must get back. Belle Ada will look for us. So will Nell and Ethel," he added. "Wow! somebody's certainly spilling the feathers this time. Did you ever see it snow harder, Ted?"

"Never!" Teddy was laconic. "We've got to go ahead, though. There's a place just beyond here where the trees form an arch. We'll stop there for a few minutes and rest the brons."

A few hundred yards farther along, the trail seemed to stop abruptly, as it narrowed off into a dense grove of oaks, whose leaves, while browned by the frost, had not yet fallen. The thickly interlaced branches formed a partial shelter from the storm, and the boys reined in their tired ponies and began to hold a council.

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"It's going to be a hard pull to get home to-night," said Roy, puckering up his forehead and looking anxiously at the little spurts of snow that were beginning to drift in through the thick canopy of leaves.

"But we've just got to get there!" Teddy was emphatic. "What will everybody think if we don't show up? We've got to get home!"

"Meaning, we want to," said Roy dryly. "Can't always do as we want to, Teddy. I want to get home as much as you do, but if the snow keeps piling up like this much longer, we'd have to fly to get there, and neither Star nor Flash has wings."

Teddy looked at his brother gravely. He knew that when Roy spoke like that he was worried.

"Guess you're right," he answered. "But I'd like to get back just the same. Oh, it isn't on account of the girls," he added, as Roy began to grin. "I want to tell Dad about that man we saw near the range where the herds are."

Roy's face sobered.

"Do you really think he was Horseshoe Joe?" he asked. "You got only a glimpse of him. Are you sure?"

"That was Horseshoe, all right. I'd know him anywhere. He was one of the rustlers who escaped in our last battle at Rustlers' Gap. I knew him by the way he slouched his shoul-

ders and kept his head down. He's on the job again, Roy, and going to start something. Dad ought to know about him as soon as possible."

Roy, who had dismounted and was standing by Star's side, leaped into the saddle.

"Come on," he said. "We'll make another try for it. If it gets too rough, we'll have to dig in for the night somewhere. But I'm afraid we're off the trail, Ted. If we are—look out!"

The two boys rode out of the grove and into the teeth of the howling gale. There were only slight traces of the trail, and they had to trust to luck as they started down the open mountain-side. The fierce norther blew the snow in their faces and eyes and blinded them, cutting their cheeks with sharp particles of ice.

A thick wall of falling snow hemmed them in on all sides. To go on seemed impossible. If they did, without the guidance of a well defined trail, they might be hurled into a ravine and dashed to pieces. If they remained where they were, death from freezing stared them in the face.

What should they do?

CHAPTER II

UNPLEASANT COMPANY

FOR just one brief minute the usually stout heart of Roy Manley quailed at the situation in which he and his brother found themselves. Then, as the storm became fiercer and more insistent, he took up the challenge that it flung at him and determined not to be beaten by the millions of white flakes that were swirling all about him.

"We've got to go on, Teddy," he said resolutely. "Nothing can be gained by staying here. Even if we can't get home to-night we can probably find a sheltered place where we can stay until the worst of the storm is over."

"You've said it." Teddy Manley had unbounded faith in his elder brother. Although sometimes he disagreed with Roy, more often in a spirit of fun than anything else, in an emergency like the present one, whatever Roy said was right.

Roy loosed a rope that he always carried on his expeditions. He tied one end of it to Star's saddle and fastened the other to that of Teddy's mount.

"That's the way I've read they do in the Alps," he said encouragingly. "It's a pretty good scheme, I think. If one of us falls the other can haul him up, and we can't get separated as long as the rope holds."

In spite of the storm and the seriousness of the situation, Teddy grinned.

"And if one fellow tumbles over a cliff he pulls the other over with him," he said, half laughing. "But that won't happen," he added. "We'll get back to the X Bar X and have a wonderful tale to relate, or I'm a dodo bird."

"Which you're not," laughed Roy. "Though you look like one just at this minute. Golly, we'll turn into snow men if we don't get on."

"I've been ready for half an hour!" exclaimed Teddy, as he leaped into the saddle. "It's you who's holding up the procession. Look out, you fellows of the X Bar X, we're going home!"

But going home was not as easy as Teddy would have liked to have it appear. The wind had now risen to a ninety-mile gale which blew the light, dry snow in great, whirling eddies in every direction. It was possible to see but a few feet ahead, and the winding trail was covered with little drifts which, in places, blotted out the path and covered the dangerous gullies with which the trail was intersected.

Both boys, however, had unbounded faith in

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Star and Flash. They were sure-footed ponies, and were used to climbing the mountain trails and finding their way, even on the darkest nights, without a misstep.

"We don't know where we're going but we're on our way," sang Roy, as Star slipped and slid down the steep incline, kicking up a shower of snow at each step. "Gosh, but I'd like some of Norah's hot coffee just about now, wouldn't you, Ted?"

"Sure would," replied Teddy. "And we didn't bring along a thing to eat, either. It's going to be a tough night, Roy, if we don't make it."

"We won't starve," Roy assured him. "Be good for your figure, Ted, to diet a little. Make you more appealing to the charming Curly. Nobody loves a fat man."

"I'm not fat, and Curly would like me any way," retorted Teddy. "Just put on a cinch strap, and never mind about Curly. She's a good sport, and so's Nell."

"You bet! They're both— Wow!"

Star plunged suddenly as he stepped on a piece of ice and swerved to one side, bringing up against a tree. The unexpected pull on the rope dragged Flash quickly forward. He slipped, slid on his haunches, and landed on top of Star.

For a minute there was a mass of plunging horses and kicking boys. Both ponies were

down and struggling hard to get on their feet. Roy's foot became entangled in a stirrup and he was flung upon the ground by the frightened Star.

Always quick-witted, Roy kicked himself free and landed upon Star's neck, holding the animal down until it was quieted. Then he got up and, holding tightly to the bridle and the saddle, helped the pony to its feet.

Teddy, meanwhile, was having his own troubles with Flash who, being fastened with a rope to Star, had been pulled and jerked over the ground by the bronco's struggles.

"Whoa, Flash! There, there, old boy! Just try it again! Now you're all right," as the pony put out its forelegs and, finding a grip on a rough rock, got to its feet.

"Some spill!" commented Roy, as he hastily inspected Star's bridle and saddle to see that no damage had been done. "We can't ride, Teddy," he added. "It's too dangerous. We'll have to walk and hold on to the broncs' heads until we get to some place where we can get shelter for a while."

Roy looked anxiously through the curtain of snow, and what he could see did not reassure him altogether.

The trail at that point ran along the side of a steep incline. On one side, the mountain rose abruptly and, as far as Roy could see, was covered with trees and huge boulders. On the

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other, not more than a hundred feet from the boys, the earth dropped suddenly away into a gully, many feet below, which was covered with a mass of jagged rocks. The sides of the ravine had been hollowed out and eaten away by the surge of the water that had flowed down it during the summer storms.

"Keep away from the edge of the cliff!" shouted Roy warningly.

Faster and more furious grew the storm, until the snow seemed to wrap the Manley boys in its folds in an attempt to smother them. They, alone, were abroad on the mountainside that day; even the animals had sought shelter.

With heads down, each leading his pony, the X Bar X boys went slowly forward. The trail was completely gone now, covered with a carpet of snow. There was nothing to guide them, all they could do was to go on, down and down toward the canyon below. The wind shrieked and tore at them, but still they pressed forward.

They had not gone far before Teddy gave a shout.

"Hooray! Look here, Roy!"

"Where?" Roy's eyes were so filled with snow that he could hardly see.

"Right ahead. It's a windfall. Right between two rocks, too. We could spend the winter there, if we had to."

Roy was as delighted as was Teddy.

“We’ll have a rest, anyway,” he said, “and most likely stay all night. This is certainly luck, I’ll tell a maverick!”

While the boys are making themselves comfortable, perhaps the reader, who may not have been introduced to them before, might like to know a little of their history.

The X Bar X boys, as Roy and Teddy Manley were called, lived at a ranch by that name, some thirty hours’ train ride west from Chicago, on the Rocky Run River. The boys had been allowed to leave their Denver school by their father, Bardwell Manley, because there was a shortage of help on the ranch, and they gladly set to work there.

Roy Manley was about sixteen years old, tall and strong and a decidedly good shot with a rifle. Teddy was a year younger, much more light-hearted and often given to fun when chance permitted.

Both boys adored their mother, a fairylike lady, small and dainty, and they likewise thought much of their only sister, Belle Ada, several years younger than Teddy.

In “The X Bar X Boys on the Ranch,” the first volume of this series, will be found an account of how the boys, after many exciting and hair-raising adventures, at last helped capture a band of cattle rustlers who had been making raids on their father’s herds.

Since those strenuous days many exciting

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times had occurred, in Thunder Canyon, on Whirlpool River, on Big Bison Trail, at Nugget Camp, and elsewhere. On their various outings the brothers had often been accompanied by a young cow-puncher named Nick Looker, one of Mr. Manley's most trusted hands. Nick had done much for the lads and in return they had aided the cowboy in more ways than one.

Rustlers will not always stay captured or subdued, and are persistent in making raids. In the volume preceding the present one, "The X Bar X Boys at Rustlers' Gap," is told how the X Bar X boys, with the aid of the neighborhood cowboys, again whipped the cattle thieves into submission and dispersed their band.

Now, with the aid of the windfall, in less than an hour the boys had constructed a rude shelter of boughs, which was large enough to accommodate them for the night, and into which the snow could not come, because of its location between two enormous rocks.

"Some ranch house, I'll tell the world!" exclaimed Teddy, as he capered delightedly around. "And a spare room for Star and Flash, see?"

Teddy pointed to a smaller windfall that was separated from the other by a couple of fallen trees, which made a complete partition.

Roy did not reply immediately, but went out into the snow again to look over the situation.

He came back covered with white and sent a shower of flakes over Teddy as he shook himself.

"It's late in the afternoon," he said, "and we can't get away from here to-night, that's certain. The next thing is to build a campfire. Go to it, Ted, there's plenty of dry wood."

In a few minutes the Manley boys had a blazing fire, and for water were melting some snow in a tin cup that Teddy carried.

"All the comforts of home," remarked Teddy as he took a drink of the improvised water. "Couldn't be better if we were——"

He stopped suddenly and his eyes sought those of his brother. Over and above the shriek of the wind and the storm had come a long, drawn-out howl, louder and fiercer than any dog could have made.

"Wolves!" Teddy's heart leaped as he said the word.

"Wolves!" echoed Roy. Then as the call grew louder, he added: "They're coming this way!"

CHAPTER III

THE FIGHT ON THE MOUNTAIN

ALMOST at the same instant the two X Bar X boys, who had been sitting on a log near the fire, sprang to their feet and bounded toward the corner of the windfall where the two ponies were quartered.

It was a habit with the Manley boys whenever they went on long trips, especially when rustlers might be encountered, to carry a rifle and, in the pocket of the saddle, a pistol to be used in case of emergency.

In another minute they had returned to the fire and were inspecting the firearms and getting out a supply of cartridges, which each always carried in one pocket of his hunting coat.

Teddy's eyes shone with excitement as he made sure his rifle was ready for action.

"We're ready for them!" he exclaimed. "We can stand off a hundred of them. There's only one place they can get in, and we can shoot as quick as lightning. You're not afraid, are you, Roy?"

"No, of course not," answered Roy impatiently. "But I'd just as soon be somewhere

else at this minute. There are only two of us, Teddy, and we don't know how many there are of the wolves. If they rush us—well, there'll certainly be something doing, to say the least."

"They won't," asserted Teddy. "Good thing we've got that big fire. Wolves don't like to go near one, I've heard. Bet they'll stop right at the entrance and won't come any farther."

The boys listened intently, but there was no sound except the shriek and scream of the wind as it drove the snow in great white sheets through the pine forest. Then, suddenly, above the clamor of the storm, again came the weird cry of a wolf. The sound rose and swelled into a long, protracted howl.

There was a moment of silence, during which the boys held their breath. Then the cry was answered from another direction. The third wolf took it up, then another and another until the forest resounded with the howls.

"Gosh!" Teddy's face was white. "Sounds as if there were a million of them, Roy. Guess you're right. If they take it into their heads to come in—good night!"

Suddenly, the howling ceased. The wolves had reached the windfall and had detected the scent of human beings. Through the opening, near which the campfire was burning, Teddy and Roy could see in the drifting snow a myriad of swiftly moving dark forms.

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The look in those evil eyes caused little chills to scamper up and down the backs of the X Bar X boys. The green and yellow eyes of a wildcat or of a cougar are startling to look upon in the dark; but the eyes of those hungry wolves were different. They were ravenous eyes, and had a look in their depths that told of the ferocity of the beasts.

Presently, out of the mass of moving dark forms, two resolved themselves into distinct figures. A couple of huge grey wolves moved closer to the front of the windfall and started to enter.

Crack! Crack!

Two streams of fire streaked red from one corner of the windfall. The bullets spat with a venomous sound as they bit into a clump of oaks, not a hundred feet away.

Bang! Bang!

This time the aim of the boys was true. The grey forms leaped high into the air, seemed suspended for a moment, then fell with a crash amid the snarls and cries of the pack.

"We got them that time!" cried Teddy joyously, slipping another couple of shells into his rifle. "Shoot again, Roy. We'll clean them out."

"Not yet, Ted. Save our ammunition until we can get a direct shot. We may need it before we are through. Gosh, what a noise those fellows make!"

The wolves were snarling and howling while they fought over the bodies of the two the boys had killed. They were piling on top of one another, slipping and sliding in the ice and snow, until it seemed to the X Bar X boys that the whole mountainside was filled with wolves.

Suddenly one of them slipped on a piece of ice, lost its balance, pawed the air for a moment trying to regain it, then shot straight into the windfall and landed on the fire, scattering the firebrands right and left.

Bang! Bang!

Teddy fired both barrels, but the bullets went wild and tore through the top of the windfall, causing a shower of bark and leaves. The wolf with a frightened howl turned tail and leaped out into the snow again, to be greeted by a chorus of howls and wailing cries from the rest of the pack. The singed wolf had apparently had enough, and loped away, to be followed by the others, their howls growing less loud and finally dying away altogether.

"Reckon that fixed them!" exclaimed Teddy, who always looked on the bright side of things. "But if they want more, let them come! We're ready!"

"You never can tell," said Roy, going to the entrance and piling more boughs on the fire. "We've got to keep watch, Ted. Wolves are tricky. When you think they aren't there, they are. They'll come back all right before the

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night's over, or I'm a tush-warbler. No need for both of us to keep awake, though," he added. "I'll take the first watch, say for three hours, then I'll wake you up."

But Teddy Manley was not sleepy, and for a long time the two boys sat upon a big log which they had pulled before the fire and talked in low tones of what was going to happen at the X Bar X Ranch.

"Well," said Teddy mournfully, after a few minutes of silence, "I'm sorry Nell and Ethel are going home. We'll miss them awfully, shan't we, Roy?"

"You bet we shall!" Roy's face grew sober at the thought. "They're the finest girls I ever met. Good sports, always ready for fun, and nothing slushy about them. I hate a girl that's always wanting to pet."

"You've said it. And since they're to take Belle Ada with them, the house will be like a tomb. But I'm glad the kid has got a chance to see New York. Wouldn't mind taking that trip myself," and Teddy lapsed into silence again.

Roy looked at his brother and grinned.

"Oh, I guess Curly will be able to stand it," he said mischievously. "Bet she's got a lot of beaus in New York. Probably won't think of you again when she gets away."

"She will, too," snapped Teddy. "Curly

isn't that kind." Then, as he saw that Roy was only trying to tease him, he laughed sheepishly.

"Hope we'll be able to get back in time for the farewell party," he said. "Gosh, it's going to be some fun! The girls have been planning it for a week. Don't know exactly what's doing, but they've got something up their sleeves. Norine let out that Norah Moore is going to make a cake, to be given to the one who does the best trick, or something of that sort. I just can't wait!"

"All the boys will be there," said Roy eagerly. "Gus Tripp and Nat Raymond, Nick Looker and Cass Cooper and Pop Burns. Pop's great sport. Mr. and Mrs. Ball will be over from the 8 X 8 with Bug Eye and a lot of the punchers from there. There'll be great doings."

"Sing Lung will be over from the bunk house. It wouldn't be a party if he wasn't along. One thing about Mom, she doesn't play any favorites when she gives a party."

"Shouldn't, either," asserted Roy. "Sing's as good as anybody else. Hope he'll sing in Chinese, as he did once before. He's a scream!"

The boys talked for an hour and then Teddy, still declaring he was not at all sleepy, moved farther from the fire, as it was warm, and threw

himself down upon a pile of pine boughs. It was only a few minutes before he was asleep, and Roy was left to watch alone.

The boy fully intended to keep awake, but the mountain was very quiet, the shelter they had constructed was very warm from the camp-fire, and Roy slowly nodded. Several times he roused himself, but at last nature asserted itself, and the boy rolled over on his side and was soon dead to the world.

Just how long he slept, Roy Manley did not know; but he awoke with a start. Where was he? What had happened? For a moment, dull with sleep, he did not know. Then he opened his eyes wider and remembered.

His heart almost stopped beating. The windfall was full of strange, dark forms. Hairy and bristling they were, with gleaming eyes. The fire had died down, but in the dim light of the glowing coals Roy could see the figures moving about, sniffing and snarling at each other. Slowly he put out his hand and touched Teddy on the arm.

"Ted," he whispered softly. "Wake up. The wolves are inside the windfall." As Teddy awoke and began to stir, he continued: "Sh-h-h. Don't make a noise. Got your gun handy?"

"Right in my fist. Leaping lizards, looks as if we were in for it!"

"We've got to make a sudden move together," whispered Roy. "We've got to scare

them so they'll beat it out before they know what's up. Now, when I count three we'll both of us jump up and fire our guns. Ready, Ted?"

"All set."

"One. Two. Three."

Crack! Bang! Bang! Crack!

The boys had sprung to their feet and fired together. In an instant the windfall was filled with a choking smoke and a whirling mass of bodies. The wolves, bewildered at the sudden attack, fought among themselves and with the two boys.

There was no time to load again. Teddy and Roy used their rifles as clubs.

Whack! Thud! Thump!

Down came the hard stocks of the guns upon the fighting wolves. The animals snapped and bit at each other. One of them caught Teddy's coat with its teeth and ripped away a large piece. The boy slipped and fell and the wolf was almost upon him. He looked up into the fierce eyes so near his own and gave up hope.

Crack!

In the mêlée Roy had found a chance to slip a fresh cartridge into his rifle. The bullet struck the attacking wolf squarely in the head and it rolled over gasping. In another instant Roy had pulled Teddy to his feet.

"Load quickly and fire!" Roy shouted above the din of the snarling wolves. "It's our only chance."

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Somehow, Teddy's nervous fingers found the cartridges in his pocket. Both boys fired twice and the wolves, by this time nearing the entrance to the windfall, leaped out of the stifling smoke into the snow.

"Come on, Ted, we've got them on the run!" shouted Roy, and in another minute both boys were wallowing in the drifted snow. The wind had gone down and the storm had almost ceased. The wolves, having evidently had enough of the fight, were racing down the trail. For some distance the X Bar X boys followed, firing at random but doing no damage as the distance between them and the animals was now too great to take accurate aim.

"Guess that will be about all," panted Roy. "Come on, Ted, we'll go back. Some fight, wasn't it?"

"Sure was," answered Ted, his mouth full of snow from a handful that he had picked up. "Let's start for the ranch right away, Roy. I'm famished!"

But when the boys reached the windfall another shock awaited them. Star and Flash, their two ponies, were not there! During the fight with the wolves they had bolted.

CHAPTER IV

HOME AT LAST

LEFT on a snow-bound mountain, miles from the ranch, without food for nearly twenty-four hours, and their mounts gone, was a situation that made even the hearts of the X Bar X boys sink. For several minutes they stood without speaking, looking out over the white carpet of snow.

Daylight had come. The edge of the sun was just appearing at the far end of the valley, over the crest of a distant mountain range.

“Gosh!” Teddy drew a long breath. “Looks as if we were stuck here till spring. Suppose the wolves ate up the brones?”

Roy shook his head decidedly.

“No. We would have heard the racket if they had attacked them. They just got scared and ran away. Can’t have gone far, Ted. We’ll find them soon.”

“Look!” Teddy had sprung forward and was examining the snow carefully. “There are Star’s tracks right on top of the snow the wolves kicked up. They went this way. Come on.”

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The boys started down the trail, following the imprints of the broncos' hoofs in the driven snow. Several times they lost them, then picked up the tracks again. For half an hour they scrambled and waded on, until, on turning the corner of a huge boulder, Teddy, who was in the lead, shouted loudly:

"Here they are, Roy! Both of them! Gosh, but I'm glad!"

"So am I, I'll tell a maverick!" answered Roy, his eyes dancing.

The two ponies were standing under the shelter of an overhanging hemlock, and whinnied with delight as the boys came up.

"Found a drink for themselves!" went on Teddy, pointing to a tiny stream of water that gushed up in the snow.

"Fine work. We'll get a drink ourselves," said Roy, and both lads did so.

"Not a scratch!" exclaimed Roy, after he had finished inspecting the animals. "Just scared, that's all. I don't blame them, either, with that howling pack around. Jump on, Ted, and we'll beat it for home."

"I'm as empty as a burst balloon," said Teddy mournfully, as he vaulted into the saddle.

As they turned into the broad canyon at the foot of the mountain, they spied two horsemen riding toward them.

"Hooray! There are Nick Looker and Gus

Tripp coming to look for us. Hello, boys," shouted Teddy, as the men drew near. "Think we were lost?"

"Your mother was worried," said Nick Looker, as he reined in his bronco, "so Gus and I said we'd come out and look you up. You must have had a tough night. Everything all right?"

"Fine and dandy," laughed Teddy. "Only we both are as empty as a pumped-out cistern. Hurry up, Nick. If I don't get something to eat right off I'll die of starvation."

As they rode along the X Bar X boys told the cowboys of their adventures—their shelter in the windfall and the fight with the wolves.

"It sure was some storm," said Teddy. "Guess we're in for it this year."

"Yes," Nick's face grew sober. "There's a hard winter coming and we'll have our hands full taking care of the cattle left on the open ranges."

The return of the boys to the X Bar X Ranch created great excitement. They rode up so silently that they were in the living room before the family knew they had arrived. Teddy flung the door open quickly.

There was a shriek of delight from Belle Ada, Nell Willis, and Ethel Carew, and a concerted rush toward the boys. But Roy's and Teddy's first thought was for their mother.

Mrs. Manley was a blue-eyed, golden-haired,

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small woman, beloved by every one connected with the X Bar X Ranch. The punchers had borrowed her husband's name for her, "the blonde angel of the West," and there was nothing they would not do for her.

"Hello, Mom!" Teddy and Roy both hugged her at the same instant, and Mrs. Manley's cheeks grew rosy as she welcomed her sons home, giving each boy a hearty kiss on the cheek.

"Me next," and Belle Ada leaped into Teddy's arms and then into Roy's. Then she turned, her eyes dancing.

"Your turn now, Curly," she said mischievously. "But don't squeeze him so hard as you did the other day when you fell off your horse. Remember he's empty now, and something might happen."

Ethel Carew's face flushed and she wrinkled her nose at Belle Ada.

"Think you're funny, don't you, Miss Smarty!" she retorted. "If Teddy hadn't caught me the other day I'd have been as flat as a pancake."

"Pancake! Oh, Roy, look!"

Teddy quickly turned the conversation as Norah Moore came in from the kitchen with two plates piled high with cakes, followed by Norine with a steaming pot of coffee.

"Sit right down, boys," admonished Norah. "I suppose you're famished. When you get

these eaten, there's plenty more. Fall to it."

"Wow!" Roy, who had been talking to Nell Willis in a low tone, decided suddenly that Nell could wait, and darted for the table. Teddy was there first, however, and for the next fifteen minutes the boys devoted themselves to "filling up," as Norah Moore called it. After that, they commenced to tell of their adventures.

Their tale was interrupted with little squeals from Belle Ada and Nell and Ethel when they came to the most exciting parts. Mrs. Manley's eyes grew large as she realized how near to death her sons had been.

"Never mind, Mom," said Roy as he noted his mother's expression. "We got through all right, and it's all in a lifetime. You girls will be sorry when you've gone, and miss all the sport," he added, turning to Nell and Ethel. "Lots of fun here in the winter!"

Ethel Carew's face grew sober.

"Do wish we could stay longer," she said, with a little catch in her voice. "But we promised to show Belle Ada New York, so we've just got to go."

"Poof!" Belle Ada's eyes showed indignation. "Can't blame it on me, Curly Carew. You're simply tired of us here and want to get back to New York and all your beaus. I know!" and Belle Ada tossed her black locks tauntingly.

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During the laugh that followed this sally, Teddy linked his arm into that of his father and drew him into the little room that served as the office of the X Bar X Ranch.

"I've something to tell you, Dad, and I don't want the girls to hear," he said in a low voice. "Who do you suppose I saw up on the mountain, just after we had inspected the cattle?"

Bardwell Manley was a man who knew and loved his West. He had met with many hardships and undergone privations before he had at last built up the X Bar X Ranch to its present state of efficiency. For years he had fought almost single-handed, except for the aid of Peter Ball and his men of the 8 X 8 Ranch, the cattle rustlers and thieves that were continually preying on the more successful ranches.

The previous summer, after the "battle of Rustlers' Gap," as the boys called it, had been fought and won by the Manley and Ball forces, many of the rustlers had been sent to jail, and for several months peace had reigned on the Rocky Run River.

Something in Teddy's eyes now caused his father to look at him searchingly.

"Don't know. Who was it?" he asked quickly, fingering his corn-cob pipe.

"Horseshoe Joe."

Mr. Manley's eyes grew grave and stern lines began to form around his mouth, which was

always the case when he was disturbed or in a quandary.

"Are you sure, Teddy? It couldn't have been."

"Positive, Dad. I can't be mistaken. I saw him, you know, at Rustlers' Gap and have always remembered him. His slouching shoulders and the way he carried his head as if he was afraid to look anyone in the face. It was Horseshoe Joe, all right!"

"He was one of the few who escaped," mused Mr. Manley. "But I thought he had left these parts for good. Where did you see him, Teddy?"

"He was snooping around the cattle just after we had got through riding herd. He must have caught a glimpse of us, for he slunk away quickly between the trees, and I didn't see him again. What does it mean?"

Mr. Manley's forehead wrinkled and it was a full minute before he answered.

"I don't know. But I don't like the looks of it," he replied slowly. "Seems as if there was more trouble afoot. We'll try to get some news when we take the girls to the station at Eagles. In the meantime, Teddy, don't say anything about it to your mother. No use worryin' her over uncertainties."

"Mum's the word, Dad."

It was late that same day that Teddy jumped

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at the call of Ethel Carew, who wanted to see him "right away."

In spite of Ethel's urgent summons, there was a lot of mysterious whispering going on among the three girls.

"It's about the party to-morrow night," Belle Ada explained, "and we're not going to tell you until then. You'll be surprised when the time comes."

"Pooh! I know!" asserted Teddy wisely. "Nell and Curly are going to wear evening dresses and dazzle us with their city styles. I'm on."

All three girls laughed merrily.

"We haven't any with us; they're all packed for the trip home," said Nell. "If we had, what would be the use? The boys wouldn't wear dress suits. Think of Pop Burns in swallowtails. He'd be a scream."

At that moment the door into the kitchen swung slowly open and the head of Sing Lung appeared.

"Me velly solly distu'b," he said, grinning. "But boys in bunk house gettee out stole clothes for paltee. Lookee swell. You come see!"

CHAPTER V

FUN AT THE BUNK HOUSE

"COME on, we'll have some fun!" Teddy grabbed his cap and reefer, as the night was cold. "Now you girls can plot all you want to. We'll have a secret, too; shan't we, Roy?"

"You bet!" Roy was putting on his coat, but cast a longing look at Nell, who was twisting some red paper with which she was going to trim up the room.

"Can't let you girls come along," he observed. "The boys will be fixing up, and they'll want to surprise you to-morrow night."

The bunk house of the X Bar X Ranch was situated some distance from the house itself. It was a long, low, frame building, fitted up comfortably for the use of the cowboys, where they slept and ate, with Sing Lung as their cook and general servant.

Once in a while Norah Moore went down with an especially appetizing dish she had made, accompanied by her daughter Norine, but as a rule the bunk house was given over entirely to the men, who considered it their special property.

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All of the cowboys claimed to be in love with the pretty, blue-eyed Norine, but the girl would have none of them, and tossed her head coquettishly whenever any of the punchers tried to win her favor.

As the Manley boys neared the mess room where the cowboys were gathered, they could hear loud bursts of laughter, the shrill cackle of Pop Burns, the veteran puncher, tittering above the babel of other voices.

"Sh-h-h!" Roy put his finger to his lips. "Let's peep through the window first and get a line on what's going on."

At one of the windows the shade had not been drawn all the way down, and the boys could see the crowd gathered around Pop Burns, whom they were chaffing good-naturedly.

Pop had a tin of powder in one hand and a sponge in the other, and was evidently explaining the use to which the preparation was to be put.

"Pop's holding forth," laughed Teddy. "Let's go in and see what it's all about."

As the boys opened the door, a gust of wind blew in and scattered the contents of the box all over Pop's coat and vest and into his face.

"Dog-gone it!" exclaimed Pop, dropping the box and trying to get the powder out of his eyes. "That's gone blooey. And I paid fifty cents for it the last time I was in Eagles!"

"What is it, Pop?" asked Roy, as he reached for the door and closed it with a bang.

"Polish," replied Pop, blinking. "Got it to polish my bald head with. Nick's got some hair and he's got grease, but that wouldn't do me any good. Leaping lizards! Now I'm out of luck!"

"Ought to have got ivory polish," laughed Teddy, winking at Nick Looker. "Be more appropriate. But never mind, Pop. Maybe Norah's got some in the kitchen. I'll ask her when I go back."

A loud shout from the other end of the room drew the boys' attention that way. Gus Tripp was in the throes of putting on a "store suit" that he had purchased in Hawley at an auction the previous fall. The first time that Gus had worn it he had been caught in a shower, and the suit had shrunk. Since then Gus had put on weight, with the result that when the clothes were finally on, they fitted like paper on a wall.

"He-he-he!" Pop Burns cackled loudly. "You sure look like one of them fashion plates we see in the colored supplements. You'll take the prize all right for the handsomest man."

Gus grinned and tried to look comfortable, but failed dismally.

"That shorthorn in Hawley sure stuck me with this suit," he said mournfully, looking at himself in the glass. "It's shrinking every minute, 'pears to me. Don't know how I'll ever

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get it off, and I can't bend over. Well, guess I can stand it for one night, but if Norah brings on any big eats—wow, something's going to happen! Here, boys, help me get out of this mess."

After a struggle and frequent admonitions from Gus to be careful and not to tear his "dress," the suit was finally removed, much to his relief, and he quickly donned his ranchman's suit once more.

"Gosh!" Gus sank down upon a settee. "Wouldn't wear those things every day if anybody should give me the X Bar X and the 8 X 8 thrown in to do it. No, siree. Wow! I feel all squashed in."

"Why don't you get your wife to fix the suit, Gus?" asked one of the cowboys, for Gus was one of the few cowboys around the place that was married.

"She's gone on a visit—won't be back for months," was the reply.

"What have you got, Nick?" asked Teddy, as Nick Looker was fumbling with a box that he had taken from his trunk. "Bet you'll knock them all silly when you get fixed up."

Nick grinned sheepishly.

"Shoes," he answered, opening the box. "Got 'em a couple of days ago. Finest-looking pair I ever saw, but I must own they're a little small."

Nick brought out a pair of very shiny, very

yellow shoes, and held them up for inspection.

"Wow! They hurt my eyes. Who has some colored glasses?" Then, as Teddy saw Nick seemed hurt at his chaffing, he tried to make amends.

"They're certainly a fine pair of shoes," he said. "Put them on, Nick, and let's see how they look."

"That's just the trouble," answered Nick mournfully. "They're a size too small. Hurt my feet like Sam Hill when I go to wear them."

Nick slumped down on a stool and started to put on the shoes. It was hard work, but he had plenty of help. One puncher caught hold of one leg and another the other, while two more pushed hard on the shoes until at last they were on.

"Can't lace 'em up," said Nick dubiously, "they're so tight, but I'll get Norine to give me some yellow ribbon and I'll tie that around so they won't fall off."

"No danger, I'll tell a maverick," laughed Roy. "You'll have to take a crowbar to pry them off, and then some. Why—Hello! What's Nat been up to? Wow!"

The door from the inner room was flung open and Nat Raymond pranced in singing loudly:

"Whoopee! Look at me! Fiercest-looking feller you ever did see!"

The room was in an uproar in a moment, the

punchers laughing and shouting at the new arrival.

Nat Raymond had on a pair of wild-west trousers with long red fringe down the sides, and a red and yellow checked shirt, over which was a strange-looking vest, which immediately attracted Pop Burns' attention.

"He-he-he, Nat! Where in sin did ye git that? What is it?"

Nat looked at the vest proudly.

"Squirrels!" he announced. "Shot 'em last fall and made the vest myself. Did it on the sly so didn't anybody know about it. Thought we'd have a shindig sometime and I'd spring it then. Some vest, eh, boys? 'Way ahead o' Pop's vest, eh?"

The punchers were loud in their praise of the squirrel-skin vest, and Nat strutted up and down the room, admiring himself in the mirror.

"Hey, Nick," called Roy suddenly, "there's someone at the door. Open it and see who it is."

Nick Looker sprang to the door and admitted Norah Moore, who was carrying a large pot of steaming coffee, and Norine with a basket of doughnuts.

"Thought you all might be hungry this cold night," she said; "so I thought I'd bring you down a snack. It goes good." Then she caught sight of Nat Raymond. She put the pot down on the table and placed her hands on her hips.

"For the land sake, Nat Raymond, where did you get that rig? Goodness, you're a sight!"

"Yes'm," agreed Nat, blushing. "Pretty nifty, ain't it? Thought I'd wear it to the party to-morrow night. Ought to knock 'em silly, the boys say."

"It sure will."

Norah Moore was having a hard time to keep from laughing, for she did not want to hurt Nat's feelings, but he was certainly a funny-looking sight. Norine was not so considerate and went into gales of laughter, in which even Nat Raymond had to join, it was so contagious.

"Say, Teddy," and Pop Burns pulled the boy to one side under cover of the merriment, "don't forget to ask Nora for that polish. She's feeling good now, go to it."

"Say, Norah," laughed Teddy, "Pop Burns here, wants to borrow some powder polish from you to shine up his head. Got any?"

Norah looked at Pop indignantly.

"Do you suppose I'd be lettin' the likes of you get away with my fine polish Mr. Manley had to pay good money for?" she asked. "I've got some sandpaper—you can have that if you want it," and Pop Burns subsided in the roar that went up from the punchers.

"We girls at the ranch house have got a secret," chimed in Norine. "You boys won't know till to-morrow night. Then you'll be sur-

prised. Don't you just wish you knew now?"

"Poof!" Teddy was always ready to tease Norine. "Shouldn't wonder if someone was going to get married. Maybe Norine and Pop Burns!"

Pop grinned weakly and flushed all over his bald head, while Norine's pretty blue eyes flashed disdainfully.

"I should say not!" she exclaimed, flouncing toward the door. "I don't want anybody around the X Bar X. A swell fellow from Denver——"

The rest of what Norine said was lost in a roar from the punchers. That "swell fellow from Denver" had become a joke. Norine was always talking about him, but he had never yet put in his appearance, and the men at the X Bar X regarded him as a myth. At the laughter Norine bounced out of the door and closed it with a slam.

"Well, maybe so, maybe not," remarked Pop Burns thoughtfully. "Can't tell about girls these days. He might show up after all, and maybe she's got something up her sleeve."

CHAPTER VI

THE PARTY

THE night of the party arrived at last. The punchers of the X Bar X were all on hand early. Each of them was dressed in his new "store suit," and they conducted themselves in their best society manners, on which Nick Looker had been coaching them for a week, from a book he had obtained from a mail-order house.

Pop Burns sported a wondrous waistcoat of many colors and stripes, and was as happy as a child.

The crowd from the 8 X 8 arrived a little later. It included Peter Ball and his wife and a number of the punchers and kitchen help best known to the X Bar X boys. Bug Eye, the eccentric puncher who, during his spare time, had constructed an auto from three left-over machines, was in the van.

The punchers at first were inclined to be a little stiff and shy. They sat on the edge of their chairs and tried not to appear ill at ease.

"Here, you waddies, snap out of it," called Teddy, as he wound up the phonograph and

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put on a fox-trot record. "This isn't a funeral. Here, Pop, you and Norah dance, and, Bug Eye, you take Norine! Get your partners, everybody!" and Teddy grabbed Ethel Carew and pirouetted her up and down the length of the room. The X Bar X dance was on.

For a while the dancing was fast and furious. Then as it began to get warm and the dancers were a little tired, Belle Ada blew a whistle.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," she announced, "Norah Moore has made a big cake with a pink butterfly on it. That cake is going to be awarded to the one who does the best trick or stunt. Everybody's got to do something."

"I can't," sighed Gus Tripp mournfully. "My suit's too tight. If I move around much I'll bust it."

"Pop Burns can, though," went on Belle Ada. "Come on, Pop, dance the sailor's hornpipe."

Pop, thus urged, to the accompaniment of Bug Eye's new accordion, went through the motions as well as his old legs would let him.

"Bet Pop gets the prize," whispered Teddy to Ethel Carew, by whose side he had managed to sit. "Pop's a great dancer!"

"Can't tell! Just wait until you see what's going to happen."

"Cass Cooper will now do a clog dance," announced Belle Ada.

Cass, who had only lately come to the X Bar X, came forward blushing, but, under the influence of Bug Eye's music, limbered up and danced exceedingly well.

"Now Cass wins!" exclaimed Roy, as the puncher took his seat amid great applause. "Guess nobody can beat that!"

Teddy, who had been edging closer and closer to Ethel, suddenly picked up a whistle she was wearing on a ribbon and blew it.

Instantly there were screams from the three girls.

"No, no! Sing Lung, not now! It's a mistake! Sing Lung, do you hear? We're not ready!"

Sing Lung, who had started to leave the room as soon as the whistle blew, came back again with a grin on his round, yellow face.

"All lightee, missee," he said. "Allee mistake. Boys havee fun. Next time, maybe, Sing Lung leady!"

"What's up?" whispered Roy to Teddy. "What have the girls and Sing Lung got up their sleeves?"

"Don't know, but it's something to do with a whistle. Say, there are two more upstairs. I'll run up and get them and we'll have some fun."

Teddy slipped away, but soon came back looking sheepish.

"They're gone," he told Roy. "The girls

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have swiped them. See, Belle Ada and Nell have each one on, too."

Just then Nell Willis blew her whistle and Sing Lung quickly disappeared. In a minute Ethel gave a shrill blast and the lights immediately went out.

A chorus of ohs and ahs came from the girls and groans from the men. Then the door into the kitchen was pushed open, and Norine appeared piloting before her a man who did not look as if he was having an exceedingly good time.

The lights came on again, just as the two entered the room.

"Meet my friend, Mr. Jones, folks!" said Norine, her face flaming red. "He just flew over from Denver to attend the party. He's the swell fellow I've been telling you about."

Mr. Jones stepped forward bashfully. For a "swell fellow" he did not appear to have much confidence in himself.

"Pleased to meetcha, folks!" he said shrilly. "Norine wrote me about the party, so I thought I'd just drop in."

Mr. Jones' introduction was greeted with a shout, which seemed to disconcert him somewhat.

"Don't mind those waddies, Elmer," admonished Norine. "They're all goofy. Come on, let's dance."

The "swell fellow," however, did not appear

to shine any better as a dancer than as a talker. He trod on Norine's toes, bumped up against everybody else, and at last stubbed his toe and would have fallen had not Norine grasped him by the back of the coat and held him up.

Roy motioned to Teddy to come out into the hall, and when he had done so, pulled his brother into the little office.

"Say, Ted," he began, "that swell fellow, Jones, doesn't look real to me. There's something phony about him."

"Same here," answered Teddy. "He couldn't have flown from Denver or we'd have heard the noise of the plane; and he couldn't have got here otherwise on account of the snow."

"And did you notice the shoes he has on?" went on Roy. "They were never made in Denver, I'll bet. Looks as if he'd got them in a marked-down sale at Eagles. A swell from Denver! My eye!"

"He has on a wig, and the way he handles his mustache looks as if he was afraid it would fall off. Say, Roy," and Teddy's eyes grew bright, "suppose he's a rustler in disguise! Gosh, if he is, we'll have some fun."

"We'll find out," said Roy. "I'll tell Sing Lung to go downstairs, and when he hears a whistle to turn out the lights again. You and I will be on either side of the 'swell fellow' and when the lights go out you grab at his hair

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and I'll get his mustache. We'll find out for sure what he is."

"We'll do it," and the boys went back into the living room where another dance was going on.

Roy, after a few whispered words to Sing Lung, who at once disappeared, sidled up to Nell Willis and playfully put his arm around her waist. Nell, a little surprised, started to pull away. But Roy was too quick for her, and, picking up her whistle, blew three shrill blasts.

Toot! To-o-t! T-o-o-t!

Out went the lights. The dancers gasped and stopped where they were. There was a ripping sound in the direction of the "swell fellow" and loud cries of protest from that gentleman.

Then the lights came on again. The stranger from Denver stood stripped of his hair and mustache and coat, which had been ripped down the back.

For a minute there was dead silence. Then came a great shout:

"Winters! From the 8 X 8! Wow, what a trick! You're some swell, Wint!"

The 8 X 8 puncher stood grinning sheepishly.

"Glad it's over," he said, picking up his coat. "Norine roped me into it. And if it

hadn't been for fear my mustache would fall every minute, I'd——"

"And you fell down! I'll never trust a man again!" cried Norine Moore, her cheeks afire.

"Never mind, Norine," said Roy soothingly.

"It was a great stunt. The best ever. It takes the prize, and——"

"It does, does it?" Teddy leaped forward.

"Wait until the end, old man. You haven't seen my stunt yet. Get ready, girls. It's a whangdoodle!"

Laughing and wondering what was going to happen next, the girls and punchers gathered around, while Teddy mounted a chair in order that he might be better seen.

Teddy bowed low, and nearly fell off the chair.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I shall do a wonderful trick that will surely take the prize. I have something in my pocket that I've never seen."

He was interrupted by a loud groan from the punchers.

"How come that you've never seen it?" inquired Nick Looker. "Who put it in your pocket?"

"I did." Teddy tried to appear very wise.

"And you've never seen it? How do you get that way?" Nat Raymond was sarcastic.

"Yeah!" asserted Teddy. "And what's

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more, nobody else has ever seen it, and when they do, they'll never see it again."

"He-he-he!" Pop Burns was holding on to his sides. "He put it in his pocket an' didn't see it an' nobody else! He-he-he!"

Everybody began to talk at once, scoffing at Teddy and showing plainly that they did not believe him.

"I'll show you now," he shouted; taking from his pocket a peanut shell and holding it aloft. "Now you waddies, watch."

Teddy broke the shell and took out a peanut.

"Look at that peanut," he said. "I never saw it before and you didn't, either." Teddy tossed the peanut into his mouth, chewed a moment and then swallowed. "Now nobody will ever see it again. Do I get the prize?"

With a roar and a yell, the punchers and the girls vowed that Teddy's trick had taken the prize. But Teddy protested.

"Norine's trick with her 'swell fellow' was just as good," he asserted. "We'll cut the cake in half, Norine," as the girl brought in a big cake that had on it a pink lump of icing that was supposed to represent a butterfly.

"Nothing doing!" Norine shook her pretty head. "I don't want any half cake. I can make another any time," and Teddy at last consented to be the prize winner.

After that the punchers and the girls danced

until they were tired, then, as the hour was late, the party broke up.

When the others had all gone Teddy and Ethel and Nell and Roy went out into the darkened hall. Teddy pulled Ethel to a seat on a long settee.

"Curly," he said softly, "I'm awfully sorry to see you go. I sure am. Hang it, I don't know what I'll do when you're gone. You won't forget me, will you, Curly?"

Ethel snuggled closer to Teddy Manley than she had ever done before.

"Of course not. I'll think of you every day. And I'll write. And we'll be back next summer, sure!"

In another corner of the hall Nell and Roy were having a like interchange of confidences.

"Of course, I'll write," whispered Nell. "And we'll be back next summer, sure. And I'll send those photos, and——"

"Here, you, break away!" Belle Ada danced suddenly into the hall. "Curly, you and Nell come upstairs to bed this minute. Remember, to-morrow's my great day, and I'm not going to be late and miss the train just because you want to talk all night. Come on, girls! To-morrow I'm going to New York! Whoopee! Yip! Yip!"

CHAPTER VII

RUSTLERS PLOT VENGEANCE

THE little clock on the dresser struck two as the X Bar X boys entered their room.

“Whew, I didn’t know it was so late!” exclaimed Teddy. “Bet those waddies from the 8 X 8 will be tired when they get home. They’re not used to these social events.”

“Any more than we are,” laughed Roy, stretching and yawning wearily. “Parties are some fun, but when they’re over—my, but I’m tired!”

The next thing that Teddy Manley knew, Roy was poking him in the ribs.

“Six o’clock, old man. Just heard it strike. Br-r-r, but it’s cold! Hurry up, we don’t want to make the girls late.”

Ten minutes later the boys reached the dining room only to find the girls already at the table and Norah Moore bringing in a great dish of hot pancakes.

“Thought last night I’d never want anything more to eat,” said Teddy, as he helped himself to the cakes; “but these are so good I’ve just got to eat them.”

The girls' trunks had been taken to the station at Eagles the day before by Mr. Ball of the 8 X 8 Ranch, and Mr. Manley and the boys were to see that Nell, Ethel, and Belle Ada reached the station in time for the morning train.

After breakfast had been eaten, there were hurried good-byes, much laughter, and some tears—the tears on the part of Belle Ada as she hugged her mother and kissed her repeatedly. This was a great event in the girl's life—going to New York with her friends. She had attended school in Chicago, but had never been farther east, and the prospect of seeing the great city about which she had heard so much from Ethel and Nell made her wild with excitement.

Mr. Manley was to take the three girls to Eagles in his car, but Teddy and Roy were to ride Flash and Star. As the automobile party started, Mrs. Manley stood on the veranda of the ranch house and waved a last farewell.

Roy and Teddy had left the ranch not long before the automobile containing the girls drove away from the house, but as they were to take a short cut not possible for the car to traverse they expected to reach Eagles about the same time.

This they did, both parties arriving at the railroad station some minutes before the train was due. Although the morning was cold and

frosty, they all stayed outside on the platform, for, as Teddy explained, "We're so excited we'd blow up if we sat inside by the stove."

"Don't get run over, and don't go to any of those night clubs, and if you go to the zoo don't let the animals bite you, Belle Ada," Teddy cautioned seriously. "And whatever you do, don't let any one grab your purse. You'd better sew your money inside your belt, and be careful——"

"Where do you think we're going, Teddy Manley? To the wild and woolly? Let me tell you that New York is safer than the X Bar X. Guess you've forgotten the time we girls were kidnapped by the rustlers!" exclaimed Ethel Carew vehemently. "We don't have to go around every day with pistols in our belts, like some people I know. Belle Ada will have the time of her life. Just wait until you read her letters!"

"And, Belle Ada," put in Roy, glancing at Nell Willis, "don't let any of those New York waddies steal your heart. You're only a little girl, you know, and——"

"I'm not a little girl!" cried Belle Ada, her cheeks growing red. "I'm almost a young lady now, and——"

Toot! Toot! Toot! Toot!

"There she is!" exclaimed Teddy excitedly. "She's just coming around the bend. See the smoke from the engine?"

A line of black smoke rose over the trees, and in another minute the train puffed up to the station.

“Good-by! Good-by! Be sure to write!”

There was much talking and hugging, of which Teddy and Roy came in for their share. Then the conductor waved his hand, the girls climbed up the steps, and the engine began to belch out black smoke.

There was a clanging of the bell, a grind and a screech as the brakes went off. The wheels began to move slowly, then faster, and the three girls were on their way to the big Eastern city.

The X Bar X boys stood watching the train until they could see it no more, then they turned away with sober faces.

“Gosh, the X Bar X will be like a tomb with them gone,” said Teddy disconsolately. “Finest girls in the world, Roy.”

“You bet they are!” Roy was mournful. “But it won’t be long before they’re back, and then we’ll have fun,” he added more cheerfully.

“What shall we do in the meantime?” Teddy wanted to know.

Mr. Manley smiled at the boy’s mournful tone.

“Buck up, Teddy,” he said. “Unless I’m mistaken, we’re going to have some lively times this winter.”

“The rustlers?” Teddy’s eyes flashed.

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"I'm afraid so. I've been thinkin' what you said about seein' Horseshoe Joe. If it really was him, and I think you know, it means there's something on foot that we'll have to look into. He wouldn't be out on the mountain-side in the winter unless he was plannin' something, and he probably wasn't alone, either."

At that moment Hank Foley, the ticket agent, came out on the platform and beckoned to Mr. Manley.

"Can I see you a minute?" he asked. "There's something I heard the other day that I think you ought to know."

"Certainly, Hank. What is it? About Horseshoe Joe?"

"Yes. Did you know that he's back?"

"Teddy saw him on the mountain the other day," replied Mr. Manley, his eyes growing serious. "He's been in Eagles, too, has he?"

"He has been, and is right now, I believe," replied Hank, with a half-fearful look up and down the street, and——"

"Let's run him down and have him arrested!" burst in Teddy, his eyes flashing. "He ought to be in jail if he's——"

"Easy, Ted," cautioned Mr. Manley, his eyes smiling again. "We can't arrest a man for just bein' in Eagles. Of course when he makes a raid, that's different. But let's hear what Hank has to say."

"It was two or three days ago," began the

ticket agent, pulling a pipe from his pocket and lighting it, "just after train time. Three waddies were sitting on the truck here, smoking. One of them had a hangdog look with kind of slouched shoulders and——"

"That's Horseshoe Joe, all right," interrupted Teddy. "Gosh, I'd like to get my hands on him!"

"It was Horseshoe Joe and two other waddies," went on Foley. "They were talking low like, and, as the telegraph was ticking, they didn't think I could hear. But as it was kinda close in the office I'd raised the winder a crack."

"What did they say?" Mr. Manley was impatient to know.

"I couldn't hear all, but one of them said, 'We got away from Rustlers' Gap, and we'll get even with Bard Manley and Peter Ball, yet. They can't fool with us and get away with it.'"

Foley stopped to light his pipe, which had gone out, and tamped down the tobacco in the bowl with the end of a pencil.

"'We sure will,' said that waddie they call Horseshoe, 'and quick, too. That X Bar X outfit has got a herd out on the mountain where the cropping's good, so I've been told. They don't suspect we're around again, and it will be easy to drive some of 'em off. I'll go up there to-morrow and have a look. In the meantime you waddies lay low, and don't be seen

too much together. We don't want Bard Manley to know we've got back.' "

The hard lines came around Mr. Manley's mouth again and his dark eyes grew darker than ever.

"I'm glad you told me, Hank," he said. "If you get any further information let me know. Give me a ring and I'll come over. It ain't wise to tell anything over the phone, you never can tell who may be listening in. You boys want to keep your eyes open," he added, turning to Roy and Teddy. "Those rustlers may prove bad medicine."

"Sh-h-h! Look there!"

Teddy gripped his father's arm and pointed toward the Manley's car, from behind which a man, his cap pulled down low over his face, dodged quickly.

"Get him, Roy!"

Roy jumped, and quickly rounded the corner of the station. But the man was quicker. He darted in between some wagons, into a narrow alley, and disappeared.

"He was one of the rustlers, all right," panted Roy, as he came back to where his father and the ticket agent were standing. "He was listening to what Hank told you. My, but I'd have liked to get my hands on him!"

Mr. Manley's eyes grew grave and his mouth twitched.

"He heard what was said," he commented;

“so now they know that I’ve been warned. Well, it doesn’t much matter, only they’ll be on the lookout. Come on, boys, we’ve got our work cut out for us from now on. Let’s go.”

Mr. Manley got into the car and threw in the clutch. The engine purred softly, then, as the car gathered speed, it led the boys down the long, shining strip of road.

“Dad’s hitting it up pretty good,” said Roy, as the car drew farther and farther away. “He’s worried about Horseshoe Joe and wants to get home. Leaping lizards! Look there, Teddy!”

The car suddenly careened from one side of the road to the other like a drunken thing. It slipped, slid, and pounded wildly. A wheel from a back axle leaped into the air. The car lifted itself for a moment, hung as if suspended by some unseen force, then whirled, toppled, and crashed to the ground.

CHAPTER VIII

ROY PROPOSES A PLAN

"COME on. Dad must be hurt!"

Teddy Manley's voice broke. Bardwell Manley was a hero to his sons, and to have anything happen to him was the worst calamity that could occur.

Star and Flash seemed to know that something extra was required of them, and sped over the snow-packed road at a speed they had never attained before.

"Oh, he mustn't die! He can't be killed!" thought Roy, as they sped along. "We just couldn't stand that." But the sight of the smashed auto, lying on its side, made his heart sink.

By the time the boys reached the car, Mr. Manley had managed to extricate himself from the wreck and had struggled to his feet. He stood looking around bewilderedly as the boys jumped from their ponies and hurried to his side.

"Hurt much, Dad?" Teddy's voice was joyous as he found that his father had not been

killed. "Let me help you. Sit down a minute. Gosh, but I'm glad you're safe!"

"I'm all right, boys," answered Mr. Manley, as his head cleared. "Just shaken up a little. No bones broken," he added, as he began to feel of his limbs and body. "Mighty close call, though, and I reckon the car's done for. Can't understand how it happened."

"A wheel came off. We saw it spin," said Roy. "It was all right when we left the ranch. Don't see——"

A shout from Teddy interrupted his brother's speech.

"I know! That rustler loosened the nut when he was monkeying around the car! We thought he was listening to what Hank Foley said. What fools we were not to have caught on! He certainly is bad medicine! If I could only get my hands on him I'd—" and Teddy scowled fiercely.

"That's what happened," assented Mr. Manley, as he inspected the damaged car. "We're dealin' with desperate men, boys, and we've got to be on the watch every minute. The rustlers' war is on again, I'm afraid. But we'll win, as we always have before," and Mr. Manley squared his shoulders and a look came into his eyes that boded ill for the cattle thieves.

"You stay here with Dad, while I ride to the ranch and get an extra bronc," said Roy to

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Teddy. "I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Watch my dust!" and Roy leaped upon Star's back and in a moment was pounding down the road.

The advent of Roy alone some time later at the X Bar X caused great excitement. The punchers came running and listened eagerly to the boy's account of the accident.

"He's all right, Mom," asserted Roy, giving his mother a hug. "The boys will go back with me and give him a lift in. It's those confounded rustlers at it again," he added when his mother wanted to know how the accident had happened. "But Dad says we'll beat them and we will. Come on, waddies!" and Roy, having changed from Star to Gyp, another pony, led the way.

When Mr. Manley arrived at the ranch the men of the X Bar X greeted him with cheers. He was popular among them because of his kindness and fair dealing, and they all vowed vengeance upon the men who considered Bardwell Manley as their enemy. Pop Burns was especially vehement in his denunciation of the rustlers.

"I'm gettin' old," he cackled, "and I ain't as spry as I used to be; but, by jimminy, if those waddies think they can put it over the X Bar X, they've got to reckon with Pop Burns," and Pop straightened and threw out his chest while the men cheered again.

The next few days were busy ones for the X Bar X boys. The wrecked car had been brought in by the punchers, and all decided it was not worth repairing, though some few of the parts might be salvaged.

“Good thing I got that new car last month,” said Mr. Manley, trying to treat the matter lightly. “Just drag the old junk back to the garage and leave it there for the present. Perhaps when spring comes we may be able to do something with it.”

On the afternoon of the second day after the accident, Peter Ball of the 8 X 8 Ranch came over to the X Bar X to have a talk with Mr. Manley. The two men had been close friends for many years, and Bardwell Manley had great respect for the sagacity of his neighbor and always called upon him for advice and counsel when trouble was brewing.

After he had been told of the events leading up to the accident and the information given by the ticket agent at Eagles, Peter Ball sat for several minutes pondering deeply before he spoke.

“This Horseshoe Joe, as they call him,” he said at last, “is not as clever and resourceful as Harvard Hooley, the old leader of the rustlers who we put out of business at Rustlers’ Gap. But he is vindictive, and I am afraid will stop at nothing to get even with you and me for breaking up the gang last fall. We

might as well face that fact, first as last. What do you propose to do, Bardwell?"

"Roy suggested a plan to me this morning," said Mr. Manley slowly, "which might perhaps work to advantage. But there's danger in it for the men, and I am reluctant to give my consent. Tell Pete about it, Roy."

"It's this," said Roy modestly. "At this time of year they can't drive off large herds of cattle very well, because of the snow, but they can snipe out a dozen or two at a time, and in the end do a great deal of damage. I want Dad to let Teddy and me take a couple of the punchers, say Nick Looker and Nat Raymond, and we'll scout around by the open herds, especially those that are wintering near Grizzly Pass. I don't imagine there are many of the rustlers, and, as all of us are good shots, there wouldn't be much danger. But if we're on the ground we can show those waddies a few things and break up their little game. What do you think?"

"It's a good idea," replied the owner of the 8 X 8 with more enthusiasm than the Manley boys had often seen him exhibit. "We ought to let those fellows know that we can't be bulldozed. Fight fire with fire has always been my motto, and I think it's a pretty good one."

"If the boys go, I'd better go along," said Mr. Manley in a musing tone. "I'm not will-

ing to send out anyone where I wouldn't go myself."

Roy shook his head.

"Had you better, Dad?" he asked. "Don't you agree with me, Mr. Ball, that Dad's needed here to look after things on the ranch? It would leave Mother alone, now Belle Ada's gone," he added.

"Maybe you're right, Roy," Bardwell Manley answered. "It might be that if the rustlers found a lot of our men were at Grizzly Pass they would attack the X Bar X. We must be prepared for that."

"Now you're talking sense, Bardwell!" exclaimed Peter Ball, grasping his friend's hand and shaking it. "You let a couple of your punchers go with Roy and Teddy, and I'll warrant they'll stir things up considerable and hold those fellows down."

"If the weather gets bad, and I'm afraid we're going to have a hard winter," went on Mr. Manley, "the herds will have to be driven down to a more sheltered location where they can pick up something to eat, and——"

"If worst comes to worst," interrupted Teddy eagerly, "we can give the other herds a few loads of hay. We've done that before, and there's plenty in the barns. Good thing we had a fine crop last——"

Toot! To-o-o-t! Squaw-k-k! G-r-r-r!

"It's Bug Eye with his new invention!" shouted Teddy, making a rush for the door. "Come on out, there'll be some fun!"

Bug Eye, the mechanically inclined puncher of the 8 X 8, who had some time before constructed what he called a "Fishmobile" made up of the parts of several wrecked cars, was just entering the ranch yard as the boys reached the veranda.

"Hello, boys!" he shouted. "Here's the old chariot again. How do you like her now I've fixed her up?"

The "chariot" was groaning and snorting and emitting a cloud of greenish yellow smoke, while the engine throbbed loudly as if in protest at being made to run at all. For just a minute it halted while Bug Eye explained his new improvement.

"See that extra spiked wheel on a stiff spring in front?" he asked proudly, pointing to a strange-looking contraption that shook and trembled every time the engine throbbed. "That's to dig into the snow and ice and help the chariot along. Got the idea from looking at Mis' Ball the other day with her egg beater. So I went right to work and hitched one on to the old boat."

"Does it work, Bug Eye?" and Teddy grinned mischievously.

Bug Eye's face fell.

"Does sometimes, then sometimes it don't,"

he admitted. "When that digger gets loose, it works the other way. Throws the snow on to me, like as if someone was snowballing. Whoa, there, you cantankerous old sinner, what you up to now?"

Bug Eye had accidentally stepped on the gas and the car started to climb a rosebush by the side of the ranch-house veranda. Some of the branches caught in Bug Eye's cap, pulled it off and scratched his face.

"Jerusalem, if that ain't the limit!" Bug Eye was mad clear through. "I'll teach you to play tricks on me! Whoa! Leaping lizards!"

The chariot wheezed mightily, turned and shot straight toward the bunk house where Sing Lung was sunning himself on the porch. Before he knew it the car was aiming straight in his direction.

"Oh my! Lookee out! Havee a heart! Wow-w-w!"

Sing Lung in his fright tumbled off the stool on which he had been sitting and fell directly in the path of the on-coming chariot. The car snorted. Sing Lung shrieked loudly. Bug Eye added to the din by heaping loud imprecations on the careening chariot.

Just before it reached Sing Lung, however, Bug Eye gave the wheel a twist and the car, turning on two wheels, shot toward the ranch house again.

Then something happened.

With a clatter and a thud one of the front tires broke away from the axle and started swiftly toward the house. Pop Burns, who had just come out to see the fun, was directly in its course.

"Look out, you bald-headed shorthorn!" yelled Bug Eye. "Can't you get out of the way of traffic?"

Pop started to step to one side, but he was not quick enough. The tire bowled him over and sent him spinning in the snow. At that moment Norah Moore came out on the back piazza of the ranch house to set a large dish of pudding on the floor to cool. For a moment, her back was turned. On whirled the tire, gathering speed on the slippery snow.

"Norah!" shrieked Teddy. "Look out! Behind you! Quick!"

But Norah was not quick enough. The tire was too near to be avoided.

CHAPTER IX

THE WARNING

“MURDER! Help! Norine!”

Norah Moore caught a glimpse over her shoulder of the spinning tire. She tried to jump aside, stumbled on the slippery floor, and fell to her knees. The tire bounded up the steps, came in contact with the prostrate Norah, and skidded to one side.

Squash! Splash! Dr-i-p!

The tire had landed squarely in the dish of chocolate pudding. Norah viewed the damage with angry eyes.

“You cantankerous sinner,” she shouted to Bug Eye, who had been chasing the tire and had stopped aghast at the wreckage it had wrought, “don’t you know any better than to bring your crazy old chariot over here? Now look what you’ve done! My skirt is spoiled, and the boys won’t have any pudding for dinner.”

Bug Eye was contrite and disconsolate.

“ ’Twasn’t my fault, Norah,” he protested. “She just got away from me and acted up, like she does sometimes. I’m so sorry about

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the skirt and the pudding. I'll pay for——"

"No, you won't," replied Norah, mollified somewhat by Bug Eye's apology. "Guess there isn't much damage done, after all. The skirt will wash and I'll make a new pudding," and Norah hustled into the house and slammed the door.

The next few days were busy ones for the X Bar X boys. Though they were in a hurry to set out on their scouting expedition that would take them to Grizzly Pass, they assisted some of the cowboys in taking out a number of loads of hay to the cattle in the near-by open ranges.

There had been another snowstorm which blocked the trails and made going difficult. The hay, however, was loaded on sleds, and with the aid of the punchers who dug out the drifts, was at last delivered to the hungry herds.

"Gosh, bet they're glad we came!" exclaimed Teddy, as the first load was dumped and the eager cattle crowded around. "Some job, wasn't it, Roy?"

"I'll tell a maverick!" Roy had been pitching the hay from the sleds into cocks to be scattered later around the range. "Looks like snow again. Think we can make the ranch, Nick, before it comes?"

"Look!" Nick pointed to the sky. The sun had suddenly become obscured, and in another

minute it was almost as dark as night. A great, white curtain of falling flakes enveloped the punchers and the broncos. It blinded them, filled their noses and mouths, and stung their faces as a cold, north wind blew it in great, whirling gusts.

The horses, frightened by the sudden squall, started to plunge and run. Teddy, who at the moment was on the ground, was caught in the dragging reins of the horses attached to one of the sleds and pulled through the snow.

“Help! Roy! Nick! They’re running away!”

In the roar of the storm no one heard his cry. Down the trail ran the maddened animals. Teddy was dragged over half-hidden rocks which bruised and hurt him sorely. With quick presence of mind he managed to throw himself upon the sled, to which he clung desperately as the ponies raced on.

Without anyone to guide them, the animals ran wild. Once the sled was nearly overturned as it struck a rock. Then, without warning, Teddy felt himself falling. The broncos had plunged over the brink of a small ravine, pulling the sled with them.

Down they went, Teddy digging his fingers into the cracks between the boards of the sled as they went over.

Crash!

The sled landed on one runner, lunged for-

ward still farther into the snow, then, as the broncos broke away, it balanced back and forth while Teddy clung dizzily to the swaying, unsteady vehicle. Then the sled righted itself, and the boy gave a sigh of relief. He was safe.

A few minutes later it began to grow lighter. The squall passed as quickly as it had come. Teddy sat up and looked around him. The ponies were a hundred yards away, standing quietly under an overhanging hemlock, now that their fright was over. Above and below was a wide expanse of white. No human being was in sight.

Teddy, though bruised from his fall, found upon examination that no bones were broken, and scrambled off the sled.

"Nick! Nat! Roy!" he called, but there was no answer.

"Hoo-hoo! Isn't there anybody around? Where are you waddies?"

Still no answer.

"Roy!"

Then, in another minute, a bronco came plunging down what once had been a trail. Both horse and rider were a mass of snow. Teddy could not at first make out who it was, but, as they came nearer, he gave a shout.

"Roy! Good old Roy! I knew you'd come! Here I am, down here under the ledge!"

Another minute and Roy galloped up and jumped from his mount.

"Ted! Are you hurt? What happened? How did you get down here?"

"Oh, I just flew down," the boy answered sarcastically. Why hadn't Roy come before and where were the others? Then, as Roy bent over him anxiously, he grinned feebly.

"These broncs fell over the ledge in the storm and pulled me with them," he explained. "No, I guess I'm not hurt; but I've had some mighty hard bumps. Where are the others?"

"There they are!" exclaimed Roy, as the two punchers came plunging down the mountainside leading Flash. "Gosh, Ted, I thought you were a goner that time, sure," and Roy's eyes grew somber. "Sure you're all right?"

"Fine and dandy!" Teddy was himself again now that help had arrived. "Say, you waddies," as Nick and Nat came up, "don't you think we'd better start for home before another squall hits us? I've had plenty, thank you, for this time."

"Sure thing!" Nick Looker was looking over the sled to see what damage had been done, while Nat caught the two broncos and brought them back. "Nothing wrong, only a couple of poles missing. Lucky you weren't killed, Ted," and the puncher put his arm affectionately around the boy's shoulders.

"Take more than that to put one of the X Bar X waddies out of business," laughed Teddy, as he vaulted upon Flash's back. "I'm

as hungry as a starved woodchuck. Let's go!"

Back at the ranch the boys made their report to their father, who was worried lest the herd beyond Grizzly Pass should be starved out.

"It was a mistake to leave them there," he declared; "but I didn't think that winter was coming quite so soon."

"Then why not drive them in?" questioned Roy. "We'll scout around and bring them down by easy stages. We'll start to-morrow morning, Dad," and to this Bardwell Manley finally agreed.

Early the following day the expedition was ready to start. Teddy and Roy Manley, Nick Looker and Nat Raymond, each upon his favorite mount and taking two extra broncos along with packs and provisions, made up the party. Each one carried a rifle and a belt of cartridges, besides a pistol in the holster of his saddle, and they were ready for a frolic or a fight, Teddy asserted.

When the two Manley boys stepped out on the piazza of the ranch house, Mrs. Manley put an arm around each of them.

"You will be careful, won't you?" she admonished. "All the cattle in the world are not worth the life of one of my dear boys."

"We sure will, Mom," promised Roy, lifting the little woman in his arms, and when he put her down Teddy in turn kissed her fondly.

"Of course, you know, Mom," he declared,

"we've grown to be big boys now—almost men—and we've got to take some of the responsibility off Dad's shoulders. We won't be rash," he went on soberly; "but we're going to get those fellows who smashed Dad's car, and we're going to stop this rustling."

"Here's the postman," shouted Roy. "Wonder if we've got a letter from the girls!"

"Not so soon, silly," replied Teddy. "Bet you Nell hasn't given you a thought since she got on the train. She's got something better to think about now," he added teasingly. Then as he ran through the letters: "Here's one for you, Dad," handing his father a small, dirty envelope. "Wonder who it's from."

Mr. Manley tore open the envelope and took out a sheet of paper.

As he read, his brows contracted and the boys could see that he was disturbed.

"What is it, Dad?" Roy's voice was eager.

Mr. Manley hesitated a moment, then he handed the letter to Roy, who read it, with Teddy looking over his shoulder.

"You had better look after your cattle beyond Grizzly Pass or some of your old enemies will get them.

"A Friend."

For a moment there was silence. Then Mrs. Manley took the letter from Roy and read it

carefully. As she read, her eyes grew troubled.

"It's a warning, Bardwell," she said. "Someone wants you to be on your guard. Oh, I wish the boys were not going! I'm afraid something will happen to them!"

Roy slipped his arm around his mother's shoulders.

"Don't worry, Mom," he said soothingly. "We'll be all right. Gosh, I hope we'll find those waddies and give them a good licking!"

Nick Looker leaped into his saddle.

"We'd better get right along," he said grimly. "There's no time to waste."

"But watch your step," warned Mr. Manley. "Those fellows are bad medicine."

"I'll tell a maverick we will," answered Roy. "We'll be as careful as a partridge with a nest full of young ones. Come on, you fellows!"

"On to Grizzly Pass!" cried Teddy enthusiastically, as the party started. "Look out, rustlers! We're on the way!"

CHAPTER X

AN EXCITING EXPERIENCE

FOR ten miles the road led straightaway and was a fair one, although the recent storms had made it slippery and the going difficult because of the snow drifts. Then came a sharp turn toward the hills, and the narrow trail began, lined on either side with a thick growth of oak, pine and hemlock. The little party had just reached the first fork to the left when Teddy gave a shout.

"There's someone coming," he cried. "Let's wait and see who it is."

"It's Mr. Ball!" exclaimed Roy, a minute later. "He's waving to us. Hope there's nothing wrong."

The owner of the 8 X 8 came galloping up and drew rein alongside the boys.

"We've just received a letter from Curly Carew," he said quickly, "and they've been in trouble."

"Trouble?" Teddy's eyes grew anxious. "What's the matter? She isn't hurt?"

"No. But the train they were on was held up in the mountains, sixty miles beyond Eagles,

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and the girls lost all of their money and jewelry. The railroad officials have a notion that it was done by cowboys and not by regular bandits. I've an idea that it's some of those rustlers who did the trick. I wish we could catch them and find out. Keep your eyes wide open, boys!"

"We'll catch 'em if we spot 'em," declared Nick Looker earnestly.

"Do you mean to say the girls lost everything?" cried Teddy.

"Just about," answered the owner of the 8 X 8 Ranch. "Nell lost her small diamond pin, Curly her pearl brooch, and Belle Ada her gold locket and——"

"Her gold locket!" gasped Roy. "Why, she inherited that from Grandma! Gosh, what a loss!"

"An' they all lost their watches and rings," went on Peter Ball. "An' most of their money—that is, what they had in their purses. Each girl had a ten spot pinned inside, an' she saved that."

"But ten dollars wouldn't see them through," put in Teddy. "It costs money to travel."

"Gee, wish we could spot those train robbers!" burst out Roy wrathfully. "What we wouldn't do to them——"

"Righto," finished Teddy.

"Might be the rustlers," suggested Nat Raymond.

"We'll find out—if we ever lay hands on the dirty rats," came from Nick Looker.

"Well, I'm off again," said Peter Ball. "I'll carry the news around, so folks can be on the lookout for the robbers—if they are anywhere in these parts," and a minute later he was on his way again.

"Gosh, that gold locket gone!" murmured Roy. "Bet Belle Ada cried good and hard over that loss."

"That loss may spoil the girl's whole trip," added Teddy dolefully.

For several hours the broncos toiled up the mountainside and through the passes and defiles with which the mountain was honey-combed. The spot at which the herd had been turned out to graze was in a small canyon the other side of a number of mountain ranges. Shut in on all sides by the hills, it formed an ideal place for the winter pasturing of cattle, unless the season should prove to be an unusually severe one.

The weather had now greatly moderated, the wind had veered to the south and the sun shone from an unclouded sky. Along the trail, the spruce and hemlock trees, weighted down with their load of snow, bowed their branches as if asking the sun to relieve them of their burden, while the birches and alders had been twisted into fantastic shapes by the storm.

The boys, clad warmly to withstand the

rigors of cold which might return almost at any time in the high altitude, began to be oppressed by the heat, and first unbuttoned their coats and then took them off altogether.

“Whew, I’ll say it’s hot!” exclaimed Teddy, as he hung his jacket on the pommel of his saddle. “Funniest weather I ever saw. Couple of days ago as cold as Greenland, and now——”

“Here comes Nick,” interrupted Roy, as the puncher, who had been some distance in the lead, came galloping toward them. “What’s up, Nick? Found a clew?”

Nick grinned and shook his head.

“Nothing startling. But I’ve found a good place to stop for dinner. There’s a big hole in the rocks that will be all right for a fire. Getting hungry, anybody?”

“I’m starved!”

Teddy was always hungry, and he did not like to be gone long from Norah Moore’s cooking.

The spot that Nick had discovered was not far away, and before many minutes had passed the boys had kindled a fire in the natural fireplace. They soon had coffee boiling, bacon cooking, and Nat and Roy were cutting huge slices of bread and almost equally large pieces of the two pies that Norah had insisted that they take along.

“This is the life!” sang Teddy, a huge piece

of apple pie in one hand and a piece of cheese in the other. "What do we care about rustlers?" Then growing sober: "Wonder what the girls are doing about now. It's a shame they had to be held up. Leaping lizards! I bet that Belle Ada was scared to death!"

The party started again with Roy and Teddy in the lead and Nat Raymond and Nick Looker close behind them. They had not gone far before Teddy let out a yell.

"Hey, Nick, stop throwing snowballs at me, will you?"

A great clump of snow had struck Teddy, and then another and another.

Plof! Plof! Plof! Plof!

"It isn't Nick!" exclaimed Roy, as another ball of snow hit Star on the flank and caused the pony to rear and prance. "It's falling off the rocks!"

Then a faint rumble was heard from above that grew louder and louder until the air was vibrant with a sound that resembled thunder, only longer and more drawn out.

Roy looked upward.

"Great jumping grasshoppers!" he cried excitedly. "Look there, Ted!"

Teddy looked up, and for a moment froze motionless.

The whole mountainside seemed to be in motion. The heavy fall of snow of a few days before, which had been piled into huge drifts

by the high wind, had become loosened upon the slippery rocks by the warmer weather, and was beginning to slide.

On and on it came! Slowly, at first. Then, as it slid over the icy shale, its speed quickened. The snow twisted itself into weird and fearful forms as it gathered the loose stones and débris in its clutch and formed them into great heavy masses that cut down the smaller trees in the onward rush.

"Ride for that ledge over there!" shouted Roy. "Ride for your lives, boys!"

Teddy Manley gave another glance at the on-coming avalanche. There was something strangely fascinating in the sight of the hungry-looking mass that was bearing down upon them. For just a moment he hesitated. Then, as Roy and the others were already on the way, Teddy dug his heels sharply into Flash.

With a leap, the bronco plunged forward. He had gone only a few yards when the earth seemed to give way under his feet.

A deafening crash! A whirling wall of snow that blotted out everything and brought darkness! A wild clutching of the air as the avalanche struck! Then boy and bronco went tumbling, sliding, rolling, plunging, down, down, down, with the snow piling up on them as if some giant were shoveling the mountain-side clean.

The first feeling that came to Teddy Manley

after he recovered consciousness a few minutes later, was that he was warm. Something was wrapped around him snugly. It was dark and he could not see. Was it night and had they camped? They had gone out after the rustlers and something had happened. Just what it was he could not remember at the moment. Then, as his head cleared a little, it all came back to him.

The snowslide! He was buried! It was suffocating, but he could breathe a little. Teddy reached out a hand and felt around blindly. At last his hand touched a broken branch and he grasped it eagerly. Then he began to dig. Faster and faster flew the snow as he pushed upward.

Crack! Snap!

The stick broke in Teddy's hand, and the larger piece flew out into the snow. With the few inches left it was impossible to make any headway.

A red haze came before the boy's eyes. His head throbbed. His lungs seemed to be filling up, as if he were drowning. He knew now what the matter was. The little air that had been in the cavity that he had dug out had become used up. If he could get no more——

“Help!”

Teddy shouted as loudly as he could, but buried in the snow it seemed to him that it was only a faint whisper.

“Help! Help, Roy!”

Silence. Teddy almost gave up hope as the air grew fouler.

Then—could he be certain?—there came a movement in the snow. Yes, someone on the outside was digging! Another long moment of suspense and a ray of light came through, and with it the blessed air! The imprisoned boy inhaled it in great gulps. Then, as the opening was made larger and Roy’s face appeared, he sat up.

“Haul me out, Roy,” he called. “Gosh, but I thought I was a goner that time. Wow, how good the air smells! What happened to you and the others?”

“We’re all right,” replied Roy, after he had assured himself that Teddy was not hurt. “Nat and Nick and I made that overhanging ledge, and the slide didn’t touch us. But you were too slow and got caught. Here come the boys! They’ve found Flash, too, so everything is all right.”

“Never touched us,” grinned Nick Looker. “You were lucky, too, Teddy. Those two cliffs split the slide and you didn’t get much of it. If——”

“Didn’t get much?” Teddy was indignant. “If I’d got much more I’d be flatter than one of Norah’s pancakes. But I’m not kicking. I had to come down anyway if we’re going on to that miner’s cabin, so what’s the differ-

ence?" and Teddy leaped upon Flash's back and prepared to start with the others.

The deserted miners' cabin that Pop Burns had told them about was reached within an hour. They found that it provided good shelter for the night and that there was a spring near by. There was a shed in the back in which the six broncos were stabled and fed, and after the boys and the punchers had eaten their own supper, it was decided to turn in for the night.

Ten minutes after the decision to retire was made, all of the party were fast asleep.

An hour after midnight Roy awoke with a start. Was someone calling? Then he heard it again. A scream of fright from one of the broncos! As Roy's eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw something move outside of the window. Then, as he looked, two balls of fire appeared, bright and yellow, that moved swiftly from one side to the other and seemed to grow brighter each moment.

CHAPTER XI

WILDCATS AND RUSTLERS

ROY MANLEY reached for his rifle and fired impulsively through the window at the two balls of fire.

Bang! The bullet split through the glass with a crash and bit into a pine tree not far away. The balls of fire immediately disappeared.

In an instant there was great confusion in the cabin. The punchers and Teddy, awakened from a sound sleep by the noise, leaped out of their bunks and fell over each other in their excitement.

"It's a wildcat or a mountain lion," explained Roy, as he started to dress hurriedly. "It tried to get at the broncos. I heard them scream, then it came to the window. Put on some clothes, you fellows, and we'll chase it."

Firemen responding to a call could not have dressed more quickly than did the X Bar X punchers. In less than three minutes Teddy and Nick were ready, with Nat a close second. Each took his rifle and followed Roy, who opened the door and went quickly around the

corner of the cabin to the shed where the broncos had been left.

"Never touched them!" exclaimed Teddy. "What shall we do now, Roy?"

"Nick, you and Nat stay around here and guard the broncs," said Roy. "And, Teddy, you and I will hunt that cat that I saw. It can't be far away."

"Come on!" Teddy was pleased that Roy had chosen him for the hunt. He was always ready for adventure.

It was a bright moonlight night. The shadows of the great trees by which the cabin was surrounded made fantastic shapes upon the snow, shapes which moved to and fro as the wind rustled the tree branches. The cat had disappeared and everything seemed quiet and serene.

"Here's his tracks!" shouted Teddy excitedly, when he presently discovered the small, round imprints of the animal. "He must have gone this way. Gosh, I hope we get him! It's a wildcat, Roy."

Something moved in a clump of hemlocks to the left. For just an instant the boys caught a glimpse of the shine of a pair of green eyes. Then they were gone.

Crack!

Teddy fired, but the bullet only kicked up a spray of snow. The wildcat had moved swiftly and silently.

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"Missed him!" exclaimed Teddy disgustedly, as he jammed home another cartridge. Then, as he turned, two dusky shapes flitted across the trail.

"There's another, and another!" he shouted to Roy, who was a few feet ahead of him. "Leaping lizards, the woods are full of them!"

"Don't fire until you're sure," cautioned Roy. "No good of wasting ammunition. We may want it later on."

The boys followed the tracks down the trail and then into a small gully. There was a sudden breaking of a twig, and the boys froze still. Under the shade of a thick clump of hemlocks they could just discern the dark form of an animal slowly creeping along in the snow.

Suddenly it turned its head and looked in their direction. Its greenish yellow eyes shone like two dots of fire. It seemed to the boys for a moment that it was not an animal, but a huge snake that was getting ready to strike.

Roy threw his rifle to his shoulder and drew a bead on the flaming orbs.

Crack!

There was an ugly snarl, a crashing among the hemlocks as the cat leaped upward. For an instant its claws tried to clutch at the limb of a tree, then, with a scream, it crashed to the ground, its limbs twitched for a moment, and then were still.

"Got him, Ted!"

Roy sprang forward and, grasping the cat by a hind leg, dragged it a few feet toward the cabin.

"Biggest one I ever saw!" he cried excitedly. "Look, Ted! If Dad could only see it! Why! What——"

Teddy was not there! A minute before he had been standing beside a big oak tree. Now only the tree showed against the moonlight. With a strange feeling of fear in his heart, Roy Manley went over to the spot where he had last seen his brother.

Slip! Crack!

Roy sat down suddenly on a piece of ice and shot violently forward. The tree stood on the edge of a small gulch, and if he had not grasped an overhanging limb Roy would have fallen down the side of the cliff. For a moment he swayed, trying to regain his balance, then, with a twist, he managed to get to the tree and throw his arms around it.

He knew now what had happened. Teddy had slipped and fallen into the gully below. It was dark down there, the thick growth obscuring the moonlight. Still clinging to the tree, Roy looked over.

"Teddy!" he called. "Teddy, are you down there? Are you hurt?"

There was no sound other than the sighing of the wind in the pines, the cracking of a branch as a mass of snow fell into the gulch

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below, and the scream of a wildcat deeper in the forest.

The ice cracked and broke. He slipped and half fell. He was almost over now, despite his hold on the tree.

Digging his fingers into the crevices in the bark, Roy pulled himself slowly back, his feet slipping and his legs doubling under him. He must not go down into that snowy abyss, too. He must save his brother at all hazards.

"Teddy!" he cried again. "Hello! Are you alive?"

It seemed to Roy that his voice was but a whisper. No one could hear that call more than a few feet away.

Again he called—again and again.

Then, from below, he heard a faint shout that made his heart leap.

"Hello! I'm here, most smothered in the snow. But I'm all right. How am I going to get up?"

"I'll help you!" Roy was himself again, alert and self-reliant. "Hold on for a few minutes! I'll get a rope!"

"All right; but hurry up," came the voice.

"Be back in five minutes!"

Roy wriggled along the icy path. At last he was away from the brink of the abyss and in another moment was running toward the cabin.

Whenever the X Bar X boys went on an expedition like the present one, they always, as

a matter of course, took along several lengths of rope, coiled on the back of their saddles. Without waiting to find Nat and Nick, who were guarding the shed against a possible raid from the wildcats, Roy rushed to the cabin, secured a rope, and returned to the edge of the cliff.

"Are you there?" he shouted.

"Sure!" came Teddy's voice. "Where did you think I'd be? Coming up in an airship?"

Roy grinned, and made one end of the rope fast around the oak tree. Then he went cautiously to the edge of the cliff and looked over. The breaking of the ice as he had slipped on it a few minutes before had left the rock bare, and made a securer footing. He was just about to throw the rope over when, his eyes having become accustomed to the darkness, he saw a dark form move on a protruding limb near the bottom of the gulch.

Another wildcat! It had caught sight of Teddy and was preparing to jump upon him! Roy's heart almost stood still. If he called to Teddy, the boy would reveal his exact position and the wildcat would pounce on him.

Slowly, very slowly, Roy, by the aid of the rope, pulled himself back to the path and picked up his gun. In another moment he was lying on his stomach on the brink of the cliff.

Crack! Crack!

Roy had fired both barrels. The wildcat

leaped into the air, then fell with a soft thud into the snow.

"Good boy! You got him!" Teddy yelled from below. "Now throw over the rope. I want to get up!"

Roy dropped the rope over the side of the cliff. He could hear it sliding and scraping over the stones and ice. Then came a shout from Teddy. "I've got it. Pull, Roy!"

Roy pulled, and a few minutes later Teddy's head appeared above the edge of the cliff, and he scrambled to the path.

"Golly," he said a little faintly, "that was a close call. I was standing there and all of a sudden my feet went out from under me and I slid down. Didn't have time to yell or anything. But I found my rifle," he added, grinning. "Come on, Roy, let's go back to the cabin. Reckon we've had enough excitement for one night."

They found Nat Raymond and Nick Looker impatient to hear what had happened.

"Quiet as a funeral here," observed Nick, in disgust. "Didn't see nary a cat. Heard you boys firing. Any luck?"

"I'll tell a maverick!" and Roy gave an account of their adventure, helped out by Teddy, who always wanted to have his say. When they had finished, Roy yawned sleepily. "Let's get a little sleep before morning," he advised. "Guess those cats won't bother us any more

to-night," and in ten minutes the miners' cabin again held four peaceful sleepers.

The next morning the sun was shining and the X Bar X boys started early. They had not been out long, however, before the sky clouded over and the sun looked as if it were wading through drifts of snow.

"Don't like the looks of those clouds," observed Roy presently.

"There's a place we can get to if the weather gets bad again," said Nat Raymond, as he eyed the sky critically. "It's built up between two cliffs and makes a good shelter. They call it the 'cowboys' hang-out,' " he added grinning. "Been there many a time."

"Hello! Here comes the snow!" cried Teddy.

The riders pressed on. The wind rose and after a time the sun disappeared completely.

With a howl of wind the snow descended in great, stinging sheets, blinding the boys and for the moment causing them to halt. Then, as it kept on, Nat advised that they look for the cowboys' hang-out.

"It's near here," he said. "You can't see it because the snow's so thick."

"Yes, you can," contradicted Teddy, who had been sweeping the landscape with his binoculars. "Right over there past that clump of red oaks. Looks as if there were two waddies there, too. Look, Nick," and he handed the binoculars to Nick Looker.

Nick put the glasses to his eyes and looked closely.

"You're dreaming," he said. "Don't see a thing except some branches waving. Snap out of it, Ted. Bet you're thinking of Curly Carew right now."

"I'm not. But I am sure I saw two men there," and Teddy looked again. But whoever it was had gone, and Teddy could see only the top of the shack.

Twenty minutes later the party from the X Bar X arrived at the hang-out. The snow had drifted around the entrance, but on going inside there were unmistakable signs of foot-prints upon the dry leaves with which the floor was strewn.

Teddy, who was in the lead, gave a shout.

"Now do you think I'm a dodo bird?" he exclaimed. "I knew I saw somebody! I'll bet it's those rustlers. They haven't been gone half an hour," and Teddy pointed to the remains of a fire upon an improvised hearth where the coals still glowed. "Gosh, we're hot on their trail!"

CHAPTER XII

GRIZZLY PASS

"LET's follow those fellows." Roy Manley spoke excitedly. "They can't have gone far, and if we're careful we may be able to surprise them!"

The party mounted again and started off. After going a few yards they found a few scattered footprints, then lost the tracks again in the drifted snow. Search as they did, they were unable to discover any trace that would show which way the men had gone.

The sudden snow squall had gone as quickly as it had come, and the sun was breaking through the clouds. All around was a mass of white that hurt the eyes with its bright glare.

Nick Looker took the binoculars and put them to his eyes.

"It's over there," said Nick at last, pointing up the mountain range where a long, dark shadow fell steeply between two out-jutting peaks. "Grizzly Pass, sure thing! Wonder we didn't locate it before!"

Each of the party took the glasses and glimpsed the narrow defile, beyond which they

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hoped to find the stranded herds, and, perhaps, the hated rustlers.

“Come on!” Teddy turned Flash’s head up the trail. “It will be hard going, but we can make it!”

The party started on, with Nick Looker and Nat Raymond in the lead. Up and up they went. The going here was anything but good. In places the trail had been swept clean, but in others were great drifts through which the broncos wallowed up to their knees. Many tree branches had been broken by the storm and the weight of the snow, and these strewn the path. The riders had to guide the ponies carefully, but do the best they could, the horses stumbled and slid along, threatened each moment with the danger of falling.

In the high trails of the grey mountain anything might happen at any moment. The X Bar X boys were used to climbing the steep paths and were resourceful, but Roy, feeling that the weight of the expedition rested on his shoulders, was a little nervous.

“Look, over there!” he exclaimed, as he came up to where the two punchers had stopped to wait for him and Teddy. “It’s going to blow in a minute!”

A strange-looking cloud, as black as night, across the face of which raced snow-white clumps of frothy vapor, was rising in the north.

“I’ll say it is!” answered Nick. “And in

less than a minute! You fellows get under that clump of trees there. We'd better not be in the open when it strikes."

With a howl, a scream, and a shriek, the wind pounced down upon them. Then it turned into a roar, and there came a sound of splintering and crashing trees. The hemlocks under which the party had taken shelter were whipped into a frenzy. Their branches bowed and shivered as if they realized that their master was at hand. All they could do was to dig their roots farther into the soil, and hold on until the fury of the storm had abated.

Frightened by the roar of the wind and the whipping of the trees, the broncos plunged and cavorted about, straining at the tightly held reins and almost unseating their riders by colliding with the swaying boughs.

With a shriek like that of a demon in mortal agony, the storm swept down the valley. The wind died away to a whimper among the tops of the trees. The sun pushed its way through the clouds, and all was peace again.

"Didn't last long, but while it did it was a rip-snorter!" exclaimed Teddy gleefully. "Gosh! did you ever see anything like our luck? Start out on a perfectly good trail, and then run up against a lot of snags. Leaping lizards, I wish it was summer right now!"

"So do I," laughed Nat Raymond. "But I reckon we've been through the worst of it."

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We're right at the end of the pass. I know it by those three white oaks down there. Used to use them for a marker when we couldn't find anything else to go by."

"Down where? I don't see anything but broken branches!" Teddy assumed the rôle of doubter. "I'm from Missouri!"

"Come on, waddies!" Nat ignored Teddy's joking and sent his pony forward. "All we've got to do now is to go down. Bet I'll beat you to the end of the pass," he called back, and urged his bronco to a faster pace.

"Boys! Help! I'm falling!" There was terror in Nat Raymond's voice that startled the others into quick action.

The way that Nat had gone was a tangled mass of snow and fallen branches. Instead of riding carefully, as he usually did, the cowboy, for the moment, had become reckless. The bronco which he was riding had slipped on the ice-covered pine needles.

Straight ahead down the decline was a mass of smooth ice, over which the pony skated perilously, and Nat could not stop it.

"Hold on, Nat, I'm coming!" shouted Roy, as soon as he saw the puncher's danger.

The only holding on that Nat could do was to grasp the bronco's neck tightly with his two arms. In another minute something was going to happen.

Gathering speed each moment, Nat and the

bronco hurtled down to what looked like certain death. So quickly had it occurred that the others were powerless to help.

Teddy shuddered as he saw Nat disappear. Was there to be a casualty after all? he wondered. Good old Nat! The X Bar X wouldn't be the same without him!

But what was that sound?

Swish! Crash! came to the ears of those on the trail above.

Two large oak trees that had been broken by the wind had become interlaced in the tops of a group of hemlocks, forming a kind of natural platform. The bronco, coming suddenly upon a boulder, catapulted upward. For a moment it pawed the air, then, as it struck the intertwined oaks, it found a footing.

It was only for an instant, however. Then both horse and man began to slide over the slippery branches, until a forked limb caught and held them dangling. The bronco screamed with fright and nearly jerked itself loose from the saving limb.

"Whoa, there, Queenie! Whoa, old girl! It will be all right! We'll get out of this! Don't be frightened!"

Nat and his pony had long been friends, and at his words the bronco quieted somewhat. But it was a perilous position, and the animal squirmed and struggled and turned its head to look at Nat with great, fearful eyes.

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"Keep hold, Nat! Don't let the bronc stir any more than you can help!" shouted Teddy excitedly.

"We'll get you out of that in a jiffy. Did you bring an axe, Nick?" Roy added.

"Sure thing. I'll get it!" and Nick dashed up the trail toward the place where the two pack horses were standing.

"And ropes," called Roy after him. "All you can find."

Nick was back with the axe in the shortest time possible, and under Roy's directions began to chop away the ice and frozen snow that had caused Nat's pony to slip. In a few minutes a long space had been cleared down to the rock and dirt.

"Great! Guess Queenie won't slip on that when she strikes. Now the rope! Watch carefully, Nat," he shouted to the puncher who still hung at a dangerous angle from the entwined oaks. "I'll throw you the rope. You tie it on to Queenie's saddle. Then we'll pull. Don't let the bronc get scared if you can help it. When we get her swinging good, you make her jump. See!"

"Sure!" called back Nat. "But suppose she breaks her neck and mine, too?"

"She won't," shouted back Roy, with conviction. "When she jumps we pull. Catch the rope."

With a whirl above his head Roy threw the

rope, which fell short of the puncher by several feet.

"Try again. More to the right?" Nat called anxiously.

Again Roy threw and this time Nat caught the rope and tied it tightly to the bronco's saddle.

"All ready!" shouted Roy.

"All ready!" came back from Nat Raymond. The boys pulled.

Queenie snorted with fear. It seemed for a minute that she would break loose from the limb which held her, and go plunging downward.

"One more pull!" shouted Roy. "Steady there now, Nat. Jump!"

Nat leaned forward on the neck of the now frantic bronco. The men at the other end of the rope pulled mightily. With the momentum, Queenie leaped forward and landed on the cleared trail—slipped—stumbled—then, as Nat pulled the reins sharply, she regained her balance, and in another minute both horse and rider were beside the others. Nat was dizzy and a little weak from his experience, but was not hurt, nor was his bronco.

"Some stunt!" commented Teddy. "You ought to have tried it at the girls' party, Nat. Beat the swell fellow from Denver all to pieces."

Nat shook his head.

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"No more for me," he asserted firmly. "I'm through with stunts. When I'm called on for more, I'll——"

"Don't stand chinning," interrupted Nick Looker. "It's beginning to snow again, and from the looks of it, it may last all night. There's a cave right at the beginning of Grizzly Pass where we can put up for the night. It goes away in under the mountain. Meant to have explored it before, but didn't get a chance. Let's beat it!"

With careful riding the boys and punchers were soon down the mountainside, and Nick led them triumphantly to the cave he had described.

"Come on in, waddies," he said, bowing low. "The cave of Grizzly Pass is yours. Make yourselves at home, including the brones! If you'll only——"

Gr-r-r! Rumble! Roar!

A huge black form rose from a recess of the cave. It raised itself on two legs and advanced menacingly. A growl and rumble came from its throat——

"A bear!"

CHAPTER XIII

OLD EPHRAIM

“Look out, fellows, it’s old Ephraim!” shouted Roy Manley, as the bear lunged forward, showing his big teeth and growling fiercely. “He’s fighting mad, too!”

Old Ephraim was angry. He had gone into the cave a short time before and had lain down for a snooze. He had chosen a nook near the mouth of the cave and the falling rocks brought down with the recent snowslide had pelted and struck him, and made him more savage than ever. Now his retreat was being invaded by living creatures.

With a low, guttural rumble in his throat, the bear came forward on his hind legs, reaching out long, sharp claws, one blow from which would send a man reeling or tear him cruelly.

At the smell and sight of the bear the broncos snorted with fear, plunging and rearing and trying to get away. In an instant there was great confusion. A struggling mass of ponies, boys, and bear, with the bear seemingly holding the key to the situation.

The cave was deep and dark. But little light

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came in from the entrance which was partially choked with the drifting snow. From several cracks on one side a few rays seeped in, but the snow was beginning to sift through them and shut out what otherwise might have been a source of light.

“Whoa, Flash!”

“There, there, Star!”

“Come, Queenie, don’t be scared, old girl!”

“Wow! Look out, Nick, you nearly knocked me down!”

The shouts of the boys and punchers added to the din, which the sides of the cave gave back with multiple echoes. The boys had set their rifles against the side of the cave when entering, and in the darkness and confusion it was difficult to find them.

“Grab the guns, boys!” shouted Roy, making himself heard above the noise. “They’re over there on the side! But don’t shoot in this mess unless you get a clear view, for you’re apt to hit somebody.”

The punchers were not equipped for the hunting of big game. Their medium-sized rifles carried a fair-sized bullet and they could shoot with accuracy for a long distance, but being cooped up in a dimly lighted cave and having to fight a bear at close quarters was not what they had been used to.

A grizzly bear, the boys knew, did not often attack a hunter unless it was cornered. Then,

as much from fear as from fierceness, it would fight to the death. In the present instance, disturbed from his sleep and hemmed in on all sides by his ancient foe, man, the bear was roused to fury.

The bear had now dropped to all fours. Even in the dim light the X Bar X boys could see the shaggy hair on his neck and shoulders, which seemed to bristle fiercely as the animal rushed forward. He reached out a paw and struck fiercely at the bronco, Flash, who had got in the way. The claws struck the leather saddle and slid off as the pony leaped backward, screaming with fright.

A rifle cracked. Teddy had fired, taking a chance of hitting the bear and not one of the punchers. There was a puff of white smoke that drifted lazily in the heavy air of the cave and added to the general dimness. The roar of the rifle, echoed back by the rocky walls, was deafening.

With a low, coughing growl, the bear stumbled back behind a big boulder, several of which cluttered the floor of the cave. For a moment he hesitated, and Teddy's voice shrilled loudly.

"Hit him, fellows! Give me another shot and I'll end him!"

Crack!

Teddy fired again, but just as he did so the bear moved to one side and the bullet spat

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harmlessly against the rock, sending up a shower of splinters.

The noise of the firing frightened the broncos further, and again they struggled and dashed back and forth, knocking against the punchers, thus giving the cowboys no chance to fire for fear of hitting a horse or one of their comrades.

In the mêlée Nat Raymond had been unable to find his rifle. He was edging along the side of the cave, feeling carefully into the crevices of the rock, but without success.

"Sure I left it here," he told himself. "Must have got knocked down." Then his fingers came in contact with a heavy stick and his eyes brightened. Grasping it, he was hefting its weight when a warning shout came from Roy.

"Look out, Nat! He's coming right at you!"

The bear had noticed the shadowy figure as Nat had made his way along the side of the cave, and with a throaty rumble started after the cowboy, running on all fours, and was nearly on the puncher before he was aware of it. But Nat was game.

"You will, will you, you old reprobate?" shouted Nat, swinging the club he had picked up. For a moment it poised in the air. Then, with a swish, Nat threw it at the on-coming bruin. It struck the bear a terrific blow squarely on the nose.

Old Ephraim gave a loud squeal of pain and

a bellow of rage. Then he scrambled behind a boulder, the largest in the cave, and for a full minute nothing could be seen of him but the tip of his nose and a pair of angry eyes.

It was not in the manner of the grizzly to withdraw from the fight just because he had been stung by Teddy's bullet and been struck on the nose with Nat's club.

The bullet had simply ripped across his flank, leaving a stinging pain, but doing no damage otherwise. The bear was equipped with a thick, shaggy coat of fur, ready for the long winter's sleep, and the small bullet had left only a dent in the flank. Nat's savage blow really hurt more than the bullet had done, and the bear blinked angrily before he again began the attack.

This brief respite, however, gave the boys their opportunity. If they could get the broncos out of the cave, they would have a better chance of killing or capturing the bear.

"Say, you waddies," shouted Roy, "now's your chance to herd up the broncs. Get them out to the entrance and chase them away. We'll be able to find them when we've got old Ephraim!"

"You've said it!" yelled Nick, who was holding on to the bridles of the two pack horses, who were still kicking and plunging. "But what are you going to do if they won't go?"

"Make them!" shouted back Roy, as he

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struggled with Star. "Atta boy, Star. Now go out into the snow and play. Roy will be with you soon."

The bronco whinnied as if he knew what Roy said, and allowed himself to be led toward the cave entrance.

"Out you go!" Teddy gave Star a sharp slap on the flank, and the bronco leaped forward. His shoes struck sparks on the stony bottom of the cave as he clattered away. The other ponies, seeing Star racing away, followed him, and in another minute all six were out in the open, in the still drifting snow.

"Now for fun!" Teddy reached for a brace of cartridges and was just going to slip them into his rifle when his hand stopped in mid-air.

"Look out, Nick!" he shouted. "He's right behind you! Duck for your life!"

Nick Looker, trained in the art and tricks of a woodsman, did not stop to ask why and wherefore. He had been taught to get out of danger and then find what it was all about afterwards. Nick slumped suddenly to his stomach, and just as he did so the great claws of the bear swept over his head and struck against the side of the cave.

In an instant Nick had rolled to one side, and as the grizzly came down on all fours with a growl of rage at having missed his prey, Nick was out of harm's way. Scrambling to his feet, the cowboy dodged behind a boulder and fired.

Crack! Crack!

Ordinarily, Nick Looker was a good shot, but in the excitement of the moment and in the dim light, his aim was poor and the shots went wild, striking the cave wall and spattering back into the middle of the cave without doing any harm.

Enraged, evidently, at Nick's escape from him, the bear was lashed to further fury. He opened his great, red mouth to its full extent and gave forth bloodcurdling roars, showing his long, white fangs, one snap of which would be enough to sever a man's arm or leg. With a rush, he sprang toward the punchers, and his onslaught was so quick and unexpected that he knocked over Nat Raymond and sent him sprawling to the ground.

Nat screamed, expecting every moment to feel the animal's claws or teeth.

But the bear did not stop in his onward plunge. There was seemingly method in his behavior. On through the cave he lunged until he nearly reached the entrance, then he stopped suddenly, turned, and rose on his hind legs. After a momentary pause the grizzly started back toward the astonished men.

"He's got us now, I'll tell a maverick!" exclaimed Roy. "We should have beaten it while the going was good. Now, with old Ephraim standing guard, how are we ever going to get out? Why didn't you stop him, Nat?"

"Me stop him!" Nat was irritated by Roy's

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question. "How do you get that way? He bowled me over like a ton of bricks. Didn't know he was coming until, swat! he knocked me flatter than a pancake. Look out, here he comes again!"

This time the bear advanced on his two hind legs, swinging his front legs to and fro and glaring fiercely. Then, with a roar, he lunged straight at Teddy Manley.

Taken by surprise at the direct attack, Teddy turned to run, tripped over a protruding rock, and fell heavily directly in the path of the swiftly coming bear.

A cry of dismay came from the two punchers and Roy.

"Slide, Ted, or he's got you!"

But there was no time for Teddy to slide. The bear was upon him. He could feel the hot breath on his face and see the wicked, beady eyes close to his.

Roy fired quickly. There was no time to take good aim. In any event he might hit Teddy instead of the grizzly. But there was nothing to do but to take the chance.

The bullet took the bear in the shoulder and caused him to drop with pain for a moment. That instant was the moment for Teddy Manley to act. Over he rolled, out of the way of the angry bear that was already struggling to his feet.

Crack!

Nick's rifle spoke. The bullet struck the bear in the left hind leg. With a growl the grizzly sprang toward the rocks and, before the punchers could reload, gained the shelter of a big mass of granite.

Teddy's fighting blood was up. He forgot all that he had promised his mother and the admonitions of Bardwell Manley. He would get that bear or die! With a shout he reached and found his rifle that had been knocked from his hand by the onslaught of old Ephraim.

The bear seemed to understand the challenge. He rose from behind the rock and started toward Teddy with a vicious lunge. The boy stood motionless, raised his rifle to his shoulder, and drew a bead on the heart of the advancing grizzly.

CHAPTER XIV

FINDING THE HERD

CRACK! Bang!

Teddy Manley fired both barrels of his weapon. The bullets struck the bear squarely and caused him to stagger. But he did not fall and was still fighting mad. With a low, coughing growl, he rushed forward, striking out wildly with his forepaws.

Nick Looker, who had sprung to Teddy's side, received a glancing blow on the shoulder and fell to the ground. The bear made a quick rush that carried him close to the prostrate Nick. The puncher, however, had kept hold of his rifle and fired it into the bear's flank.

Old Ephraim swerved and staggered off, yelling and squalling, until he found refuge behind a boulder.

"We've got him going!" yelled Roy, as Nick scrambled to his feet and loaded his rifle again quickly. "Good boy, Nick. Thought you were a goner, but you're quick on the trigger, I'll tell a maverick!"

"Look out!" yelled Teddy. "He's coming out again!"

The bear, although weak from his wounds, still had some fight left in him. He shuffled out from behind the boulder straight toward the waiting punchers, seemingly without fear.

"Let him have it!" shouted Roy. "Now's our chance! Good-by, old Ephraim!"

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

The four rifles spoke as one. The sound of the firing in the narrow cave was deafening, and the smoke from the rifles hung for a minute like a dusky curtain that obscured the view. When it cleared a little, there was a great shout.

"Whoopee! Hooray! Yip! Yip! He's done for!"

The bear was stretched on the floor of the cave, his great bulk seeming larger than ever in the dim, misty light. Old Ephraim had fought his last fight.

"Look out, he might be faking," cautioned Nat Raymond, as the X Bar X boys rushed forward.

"He couldn't fake much with all those bullets in him," laughed Roy. "No, sir, he's as dead as a doornail. Golly, but I wish we could carry him home! Wouldn't Dad be tickled?"

"Can't though," said Nick, as he lifted one huge paw and let it fall back with a thud. "Tell you what we can do. We'll leave him here until we drive in the herd. Then maybe we can come back and load him on a sled and

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take him to the ranch. If the wolves don't get at him," he added.

"We'll do that little thing!" exclaimed Roy. "And when we go we'll put some branches across the door of the cave so he'll be safe. But come on out, waddies. We've got to find the broncs. Moreover, some fresh air will do us all good. Wow, but it's close in here! Beat you out, Ted!"

The two boys dashed away and soon were out in the snow. The storm had ceased and the sun was beginning to break through the clouds.

The ponies, they found, had not gone far, having recovered quickly from their fright, and the boys discovered them standing quietly under a clump of black, ice-skimmed spruces, munching at the bark.

"Bet the poor things are hungry, same as I am!" exclaimed Teddy. "Gosh, but I could eat a steak right off that bear! What do you say, Roy, shall we have one?"

"Not for me," laughed Roy. "Tried a bear steak once, but never again. It was tough and stringy and tasted strong like—like——"

"Like an old horse," finished Teddy. "Not that I have ever eaten one, but I can imagine. Come on, we'll go back to the cave and get a snack and feed the broncs. Then we'd better go through the pass and see if we can find the cattle."

"I'm with you!" and Roy began to drive

the broncos toward the cave where they could better feed and rest.

As the two boys neared the entrance, Teddy stopped suddenly.

"Listen!" he exclaimed. "What's that? Sounds like music!"

"Sure does!" Roy listened for a moment and then hurried forward. "Maybe the bear's come to life and is trying to amuse himself until we get back," he remarked, grinning. "Anything seems to happen on this mountain!"

As the boys entered the cave a curious sight met their eyes. Seated on a boulder by the side of the dead bear was Nat Raymond, lustily playing a mouth organ. At the sight of the Manley boys he stopped playing and grinned sheepishly.

"How do you like this here music?" he asked.

"Great!" replied Teddy. "But I didn't know, Nat, that you were musical. Something new, isn't it?"

Nat grinned again.

"Knew I'd been missin' somethin' all my life," replied Nat seriously. "I was cut out to be a great musician! Got this here mouth organ from Chicago. Set me back two bucks. Was goin' to play it at the party, but I got cold feet at the last moment and didn't have grit enough."

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"You and Bug Eye ought to start a band," laughed Roy. "Wow! That wouldn't be such a bad idea, after all, would it, Ted? Nick with his mouth organ, Bug Eye and his accordion, and you can play the fiddle and Belle Ada the piano."

"What will you do?" asked Teddy suspiciously.

"Me? Oh, I'll be the leader. I'll get Norah to give me a broom handle, and if you don't play correctly I'll beat you all up."

"Glad I'm not musical," laughed Nick. "But I'm hungry just the same. Go to it, waddies, and when we've finished we'll hit the trail again."

Grizzly Pass was a long, narrow defile in the mountains that ran for nearly a mile between two walls of rock which rose sheer and black to a distance of two hundred feet or more. Here and there a stunted tree grew, but generally speaking scarcely even a bush or a vine found its root in the narrow crevices of the granite slabs. It was as if a giant sculptor had chiseled his way through the mountains and then, pleased with his work, had gone away in search of other mountains to conquer.

As the party turned into the pass, Roy gave an exclamation of delight.

"What a place to hold out against an army!" he said admiringly. "Half a dozen men could hold this place against a thousand."

"Unless they came in from both ends at once," interposed Nat solemnly. "Then we'd be caught like rats in a trap. Always glad when I get through here. Gives me the creeps, somewhat."

The Manley boys and punchers, at Nat's suggestion, were on the alert for any trap that might be laid for them. They scanned the narrow pass eagerly as they went along, and turned often to look back at the way over which they had come, lest a wary rustler might have followed and a well-aimed shot might hit them.

Nothing happened until the party was about half way through the pass, in the narrowest and darkest spot, where two sharp rocks jutted out from either side, making the trail narrower still.

Roy, who was riding ahead, turned and waved his hand to the others, who were close on his heels.

"Beat you waddies to the end of the pass!" he called. "I'm tired of smooching along. Get a wriggle on. One, two, three! Go!"

Star leaped forward under Roy's urging. The other broncos followed quickly. For a minute it was nip and tuck. Then Roy's mount drew ahead.

"Nothing to it!" shouted Roy over his shoulder. "Got you waddies beat a mile, and——"

Then something happened.

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Star stopped suddenly as if he had hit a barrier, and stumbled to his knees. Roy, who was not expecting such a jolt, pitched over the pony's head, while the others went down in a jumbled mass on top of the prostrate Star.

For a brief time all was confusion, then Teddy, who was the first to extricate himself from the tangle, started to go to Roy's aid, as the boy was lying half dazed in the middle of the pass. Suddenly, Teddy, too, tripped and fell.

"Something funny here!" he exclaimed, as he picked himself up. "Gosh all hemlocks! Look there!"

Across the trail had been strung several fine wires. They were small enough to escape detection if a person was not looking for them, but of sufficient stoutness to cause a pony or a man to fall when they were struck.

"Of all the dirty tricks!" Nick Looker was raging mad. "If I could only get my hands on those rustlers I'd——"

"Let's see if Roy's hurt first," said Teddy, running up to where his brother was now slowly picking himself up and feeling of his head in a dazed manner. "Are you hurt much, Roy?"

"Only got a lump on my head the size of a whoofus' egg," replied Roy. "Gosh, that was some cropper! What happened, Ted?"

"I'll tell you what happened," answered Teddy, scowling fiercely. "Those confounded rustlers strung wires across the pass, so that we'd fall over them and get hurt. Lucky we weren't all killed and the bronses, too. Say, that's the limit, isn't it?"

"It sure is." Roy was beginning to comprehend. "We've got to get them now, fellows, if we have to camp here all winter. Gosh, what a dirty trick! Bet you're right about its being rustlers—and Horseshoe Joe, at that. They're somewhere near here."

Nick Looker and Nat Raymond began to unfasten the wires which were tied to a stunted tree on either side of the pass. It took only a few minutes to do so, and the punchers hung the coils on their saddles, for evidence which they could produce later on, if necessary.

"All ready?" exclaimed Nick, as he swung himself into his saddle. "And be careful now, boys; those fellows would stoop to anything. They're varmints, not men!"

"You've said it!" assented Roy, as he carefully felt of the lump on his head. "Wouldn't want another tumble like that, I'll tell a maverick!"

At the other end of the pass the boys came out into a wide valley, in one corner of which they saw a herd of grazing cattle.

"There they are!" shouted Teddy and Roy

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at the same instant. And Teddy added: "All with the good old X Bar X brand, and not a rustler in sight."

The boys and the punchers rode in among the herd, and after a close inspection pronounced them in good condition. The canyon, where the cattle were grazing, was on the south side of the mountain, hemmed in by the surrounding hills, and consequently little snow had come that way.

"But it wouldn't do to leave them here," declared Nick Looker sagely. "They'll sure be snowed in later on, and probably freeze to death. We ought to start back with them to-morrow."

"We'll do that little thing," assented Roy. "To-morrow we'll back trail again. But what about the rustlers?" he added. "I don't want to go until we get a sight of them. Gosh, I couldn't look Dad in the face if we went back without a fight."

"You've said it!" Teddy's eyes blazed. "Let's go in search of them. We'll find them, too, or we'll all be dodo birds."

Nat and Nick, as eager as the X Bar X boys to have a brush with the cattle thieves, echoed Teddy's sentiment, and they shouted:

"On to the rustlers!"

CHAPTER XV

THE BOYS MEET A STRANGER

LEAVING the cattle grazing peacefully in the hill-locked canyon, the Manley boys and the punchers sallied forth in search of the rustlers, who, they felt certain, were in the neighborhood.

Roy suggested that the party should separate, he and Teddy going to the right, Nick Looker and Nat Raymond, to the left. In case any of the cattle thieves were sighted, it was agreed that two shots should be fired as a signal.

"One shot won't count," said Teddy. "We might see a bear or something and want to pot him off. But if you hear two shots, Nick, you and Nat come hustling."

"You bet we will," answered Nick. "And I'll be listening for those two cracks. Those waddies are in this neighborhood, I'm sure, and the sooner we find them and round them up, the better."

"We'll scout around for a couple of hours," said Roy, "and then if we don't find any trace of the rustlers, I think we had better start

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driving the herd through the pass. It will take some time for them to go through, it's so narrow, and we don't want to hurry them. I'm afraid there's going to be another storm, and I'd like to get started for home. Another heavy storm might prove bad medicine."

Nick Looker eyed the sky critically.

"Wouldn't be surprised if she'd get here by night," he observed. "The sun's wading and the wind's gone around to the east. You're not calculating to go back the same way we came, are you, Roy?" he asked.

"Nat thinks we ought to take the other trail back," answered Roy. "It's more dangerous and it's steep, but it will give us a chance to feed the cattle at a couple of ranches on the way, and that would be an advantage. Isn't that so, Nick?"

Nick nodded assent.

"We can get through on that other trail, all right," he said with conviction. "I've been over it before, and so has Nat. We——"

"Oh, stop gassing," interrupted Teddy impatiently. "Let's be on our way. I want to catch a rustler."

The X Bar X boys followed a narrow trail that skirted the edge of the canyon, and worked from the cover of big brush to that of jutting rocks, in the hope that should the rustlers be in that vicinity, they could be surprised before the boys themselves were discovered.

What little snow there was in the canyon had settled in the warmth of the sun, and was packed tightly. This made the going easy, and the ponies galloped along at a fast pace.

Entering a narrow defile that led from the valley into the hills again, Roy reined up Star to a walk and waited for Teddy, who had lingered some distance behind, to come up.

"I have a notion that the rustlers are pretty shrewd waddies," he said, "and I imagine they have kept track of us all along. From the fire we found in that hang-out, we've been only a jump or two behind them. If we can only get the herd through Grizzly Pass and on to the other trail before anything happens, we'll be lucky."

Teddy was always confident that they could do anything that they undertook.

"Oh, we'll get them through all right," he said.

Just then his bronco whinnied loudly and stopped short, almost pitching the boy over its head.

"What's the matter, Flash? See anything I don't? Gosh, Roy, I believe there's something moving in that clump of bushes!"

Roy rode up beside his brother and the two boys looked searchingly at the thick mass of brush which Teddy thought he had seen move. For a minute the lads could discern nothing. Then the leaves parted slightly and a pair of

bright, sharp eyes looked out at the brothers.

Teddy raised his rifle to his shoulder, and would have fired quickly had not Roy interposed.

"Don't fire yet. Let's see what it is first. Wow, what eyes! They bore right through a fellow!"

The animal began to come fearlessly out of the bushes. It had grizzled fur on its squat body, a thick neck, and short legs, which gave evidence of enormous power and strength.

"Whew!" Teddy gave a low whistle. "It looks like a bear, but it's got the face of a weasel. Wouldn't like to meet that fellow alone on a dark night! What is it, Roy?"

"Don't know, but he looks dangerous. Perhaps, we'd better give him one. Aim low, Teddy!"

Teddy was about to raise his rifle again when a loud snarling and tearing came from behind the brush and the animal leaped back again, out of sight.

"There are more of them, and they've got a steer!" exclaimed Roy. "Hear them crunch its bones? Come on, Ted, we've got to rout those fellows out of there, whatever they are!"

The two boys sprang from their mounts at the same instant and crept nearer to the bushes. Then something happened quickly. The animal, that had evidently been watching the boys' approach, gave a sudden leap into the open.

With a fierce snarl, it sprang toward Teddy, straight for the boy's throat, which the great weasel-like head just missed by the fraction of an inch. Its bared teeth caught in the boy's leather coat, which he had unbuttoned because of the warmth, and the sharp incisors buried themselves in the flap.

So fierce had been the onslaught that the impact bore Teddy to the ground. In another instant both boy and animal were fighting savagely.

"Get your knife, Ted, if you can!" shouted Roy, as he leaped forward and buried his own knife in the flank of the struggling animal. Attacked from the rear, the beast let go its hold of Teddy for a moment and turned toward Roy, snarling and growling harshly.

The respite gave Teddy his chance. He scrambled to his feet and reached for his rifle. Roy, dodging the animal's attack, secured his own rifle from Star's saddle.

Crack! Crack!

Both boys fired but an instant apart. The animal, with a hideous cry, leaped high into the air, then fell to the ground, where it rebounded for a short distance. Then its muscles twitched, and it lay still.

"Hurt much, Ted?" Roy was anxious to know how his brother had fared in the combat.

"Nothing, only a scratch," and Teddy displayed a long, red mark on his arm. "But that

fellow certainly made a wreck of my coat," and the boy looked ruefully at the slashed leather. "Say, Roy, you were right on the job again, weren't you? If you hadn't given that slash, I wouldn't be talking now," and the boy's face grew sober at the thought.

"Just got him in time," answered Roy, modestly. "Wow, but he was a fast worker! He's a new one on me, I——"

There was a clattering of hoofs, and Nat Raymond and Nick Looker came racing up at full speed.

"Where are they? Did you get 'em? How many did you see? We heard your signal. What's up?"

Nat and Nick shouted their questions eagerly as they came up. When they saw the dead animal and Teddy's tattered coat, both gave a low whistle.

"What is it?" Teddy was anxious to know. "Ever see anything like it before, Nat?"

"Not me," he said. "How about you, Nick?"

"Sure thing," Nick answered. "It's a wolverine. I've seen a lot of 'em up north, but they don't get down this way very often. So it attacked you, did it, Teddy? Lucky you got off so easy. It's one of the fiercest animals there is. Kind of a bear and wolf and weasel rolled into one. Bet there's another around somewhere, they usually travel in pairs."

"There is! Behind that bush. They were

eating a steer when we surprised them. Come on, boys, we'll go in there and get the other one now."

"Be careful," Nick cautioned "They're quick workers. Like a flash of lightning."

"I'll tell the world they are," laughed Teddy ruefully. "Golly, I'll never forget the look in that fellow's eyes when he came straight at me."

The party beat through the bush and on the other side found the half-eaten carcass of a steer, but the second wolverine was gone. For some time they looked, then decided to give up the search and start the herd toward home.

"No more little wolves, nor rustlers, nor anything exciting!" exclaimed Teddy mournfully, as the punchers began to drive the cattle toward the pass.

"Like to have something going on every minute, wouldn't you, Ted?" said Roy teasingly. "You and Curly would make a good team; she can't keep still a second."

"Maybe we will, some day," responded Teddy cheerfully. "Wait till she comes back next summer, and see what will happen. Bet you won't be sorry to see Nell, either. You and she——"

"As I was saying," interrupted Roy, giving Nat a glance, "play the wedding march for the boy on your mouth organ, Nat. Ought to sound nifty out here in the wilds."

"Can't do it," replied Nat. "'Cause, why? Don't know it, that's the reason. But here's something better," and Nat began to play, "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-night."

"But there won't be," commented Teddy sadly. "It's going to be cold to-night, and there won't be a thing doing. Gosh, what a life!"

Roy guided Star over to his brother's side.

"Teddy, do you suppose the girls got to New York all right? That hold-up on the train may have been worse than we know. With only ten dollars apiece——"

"Well, but the railroad would have to help 'em—they have got to do something for passengers that are robbed."

"Gee, if only they get their jewelry and watches and money back!"

"And Belle Ada's gold locket. That heirloom of Grandma's can't be replaced."

"Maybe's it wasn't cowboys at all that raided the train. It might have been regular train bandits."

"Perhaps, but I never heard of train bandits in this neighborhood. It seems likely that it was rustlers, they not having much chance to get away with cattle since the battle of Rustlers' Gap."

"Well, rustlers or bandits, if only we can get our hands on 'em——"

As the men and cattle made their way through Grizzly Pass, five pair of keen, searching eyes watched them every minute of the time, and never relaxed their vigil until the last steer had passed in between the high walls of granite that led to the trail beyond.

Then from their eerie on the cliffs above, five figures came sliding down to where their broncos had been tethered, and raced away.

That evening, after the herd had been brought safely through the pass and quartered in a sheltered valley among the hills, the boys and punchers urged their broncos upward to a ledge in the rocks that was deep and long enough to serve as a resting place for the night.

Tired from their exertions, it was not long before the members of the party decided to wrap themselves in their blankets and sleep. The last thing that any of them remembered was hearing Teddy, who was looking out over the gully, say in a singsong voice:

“Nine o’clock and all’s well. Not a rustler in sight!”

An hour later, as the snow began to fall in great, whirling gusts, five horsemen, with their sombreros flattened against the wind, rode swiftly into the valley and prodded the tired cattle.

There was no sound. No creaking of leather or beating of hoofs, yet the herd started to move, slowly at first, then more swiftly as the

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ghostlike five urged them on, until the cattle, horses, and men merged into a thick, white curtain of the drifting snow.

Once only did the leader turn. Then he put glasses to his eyes and swept quickly the ledge on the hills.

"See anything, Horseshoe?" asked the man nearest to him.

Horseshoe Joe grinned in the darkness.

"Nary a thing. Every waddy of them is asleep. Jumping grasshoppers! I'd like to hear what they have to say when they wake up in the morning and find what we've done. Wow!"

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE IS THE HERD?

THE morning is slow in coming in the mountains. It was still snowing, but not so heavily, when the first faint rays of light began to penetrate through the mass of pines and hemlocks that surrounded the ledge under which the men and boys were sleeping.

Wearied by their adventures of the day before, all had slept soundly, and it was not until the sun had been an hour trying to push its way through the snow clouds that they awoke.

Teddy, as usual, was the first to awake, and for a few minutes he lay listening to the heavy breathing of the others. But if he could not sleep, neither should anyone else, and with a bound Teddy was on his feet whooping loudly.

"Say, you waddies," he shouted, "time to get up and have breakfast! We've got a hard day's work before us, so hustle! Gosh, but I'm hungry!"

The others rose grumbling at being disturbed by the exuberant Teddy, but Nick Looker soon started a fire and put over it the coffee to boil

while Nat Raymond fed and watered the broncos.

"Going out and have a look around," called Teddy, as he disappeared around a huge boulder. Then they heard him shout: "Going to stop snowing, fellows! My, but the air smells nice! Great, jumping grasshoppers!"

"What's he seen now?" laughed Nick, as he took the coffeepot from over the fire and began to pour the steaming coffee into tin cups which each had brought. "Maybe another wolverine, but I reckon it will keep."

For a minute there was silence. Then came Teddy's wild shout again.

"Come out here, you fellows, quick! Something's happened!"

Roy and the punchers hurried to find Teddy, who was standing on the top of a rock, looking out on the valley below.

"Look there, and tell me if you can see something I can't," he cried excitedly, pointing toward the plain. "They've gone, every mother's son of them!"

"Gone! Who? What?"

Nick Looker's voice sounded incredulous. For a moment he did not comprehend what Teddy meant.

"The herd!" went on Teddy shrilly. "They've disappeared! Vamoosed! Just vanished, and there isn't a track to show which way they went!"

"Gone!" gasped Roy, as he looked out on the shimmering snow, its unbroken surface beginning to be tinged with red from the rising sun that was now showing over the hill tops. "Where to?"

"Ask me something easy," replied Teddy impatiently. "Here, you waddies, don't stand around like dumb-bells! We've got to get them back. Come on," and Teddy started down the trail.

"Wait, Ted," said Roy quietly, but in a tone that brought his brother back. "Don't go off half-cocked. We've got to look at this thing sensibly, and then plan what we will do. Could they have wandered off in the storm? What do you think, Nick?"

Nick Looker shook his head.

"I don't think so," he answered. "If they had, there would sure be some stragglers, and there isn't one. No, I'll say that during the night the rustlers drove them off, and the snow has covered their tracks. It was cleverly done. Those fellows are no fools, and we've got to pit our wits against theirs. But we'll win in the end," he added confidently.

"When do we start?" Teddy was anxious to be gone.

"We'll have breakfast first," said Roy. "It's all ready. Thought you were starving, Ted," he teased, as the boy seemed disinclined to agree with the plan.

"Was; but we're wasting time. What's food when it comes to getting the cattle back?"

"A good deal," replied Roy, as he led the way back to the ledge. "We're in for a hard day, it looks to me, and we've got to be well fortified. Don't know when we'll get a chance to eat again."

The others agreed that Roy was right, and although they were anxious to be off, managed to eat a good breakfast. After it was finished, what was left of the provisions they had brought with them was loaded on the pack horses again and the broncos were saddled.

Just as they were ready to start, Roy called the others outside again for a council.

"We don't know which way the herd was taken," he said slowly, "and we might waste hours if we went in the wrong direction. What have you to suggest, Nick?"

Nick Looker was one of the most trusted and experienced punchers on the X Bar X Ranch, and his knowledge of hunting and of woodcraft was more extended than that of any other of the cowboys.

For a full minute Nick did not answer Roy's question, but stood looking out over the valley below.

"I think," he said at last, "that the rustlers wouldn't drive them the way we had them headed. It would mean that they would have to take them past the two ranches we had in

mind, as there isn't any other outlet, once they got started, and that wouldn't suit those thieves at all. Am I right, Roy?"

Roy nodded his head vigorously.

"Think you are, Nick. And that means——"

"That they drove them back through Grizzly Pass, and are trying to make some place they have in mind where they can hide them. I've never been very much the other side of the pass, but reckon there are lots of gullies and gulches where a small herd could be cached and would be hard to find unless we stumbled on them accidentally."

"That's what they've done!" Teddy was jubilant. "We've got to go through the pass again. Come on!"

It took the party but a few minutes to get their mounts, and, with Roy in the lead, they began to go down the narrow trail that was now choked with snow again from the recent fall, which made the going extremely hazardous.

"Watch your step!" counseled Nat Raymond, as the boys and punchers turned into the pass. "Remember what happened here before. We don't want to run into any more hidden wires and take a cropper. That sort of thing don't pay!"

Slowly, and with great care, the party entered the pass and proceeded between the steep granite walls. Nat Raymond had delegated

himself a committee of one to scout ahead and look for possible trouble, but although his keen eyes searched everywhere, nothing was discovered.

"Well, we got through all right," he said as the broncos cantered out of the pass and on to the broad field beyond. "Now it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. Wow! what's that boy caught sight of now?"

Teddy, the last to come through the pass, had pulled Flash up suddenly and leaped to the ground. Running to one side he began to paw over the soft snow that had formed itself in a little, round drift.

"What are you doing, Teddy?" called Roy, perplexed at his brother's strange antics. "What's the idea? Going to dig in for the winter and come up next spring, like the ground hog?"

Teddy did not answer for a minute, but kept sweeping the snow from side to side. Then he sprang to his feet with a shout.

"I've got it! It's a clew! They came this way all right. Gosh, what luck!"

"Got what? Speak United States, Ted!" Roy was impatient to know what his brother had found.

"See? It's a buckle!" and Teddy put something shiny into Roy's hand. "I saw it shine just as we came through the pass, then lost it when we turned. None of us wears anything

like that, so it must have belonged to the rustlers. We're on the right track, Roy. I knew they'd gone through the pass again!"

"Thanks to Nick Looker," laughed Roy. "Don't take the credit yourself, Ted. If Nick hadn't suggested this route we might be hunting down the other way."

"Well, I found the buckle, anyway," asserted Teddy, proud that he had seen something that had escaped the sight of the others. Then, as Nat and Nick came galloping up, the buckle was inspected critically.

"It's from one of their bronses," said Nick, as he handed the bit of steel back to Teddy. "Strap's wore out, most likely. None of the X Bar X outfit ever used anything like that. "It's a good find, Teddy. Now that we know we're on the right trail, let's go ahead."

It was decided that the four should keep together and not separate as they had done on the previous day.

The riders wound up a constantly narrowing defile, out on to a small plateau, and then into the hills again. Rounding a curve, Teddy discovered a thick grove of hemlocks. There was no snow directly under the green trees, but something lying upon the ground caught the boy's keen eyes.

Jumping off Flash, Teddy hurried into the grove, having to bend low so that the overhanging branches might not scratch him. In a

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minute he returned triumphant, hugging something to him as if it were a box of treasure.

"Look here!" he shouted, as the others came up and looked at him wonderingly. "See what I've found! Another clew!"

What Teddy had discovered was an old, rusty canteen that had evidently been discarded by the rustlers when it was emptied. It was of an odd shape, and none of the party, with the exception of Nick Looker, had ever seen one like it before.

"It's Mexican," said Nick, as soon as he saw it. "Bet those waddies come from down that way. I'd like to get my hands on them. I'd fix them!"

"Some of those rustlers had that kind of a canteen, all right," cried Roy. "And they're not far away, either, if you ask me. We're getting warm," and Roy pulled off his cap and began to fan himself in jest.

"They wouldn't drive the herd up this steep place," observed Nick. "That is, it isn't likely. But I think if we get up on that peak, there, we may be able to see something with our glasses. Shall we try it?"

"Good idea!" Roy always had a great respect for anything that Nick Looker suggested. "Lead the way, Nick. The snow's let up for a time, anyway, and we ought to be able to see if we get high enough."

Up the trail toiled the broncos, slipping and

scraping on the ice-covered stones and rocks. But all of them were sure-footed animals, and after a hard struggle the top of the peak was reached.

Each of the party had a pair of binoculars, and almost at the same instant looked out over the plain below. There, they could see a mass of cattle, huddled together in one corner of the plateau, weaving and swaying from side to side as they made their way toward the north.

Back of them were five men on horseback, riding furiously over the undulating plain and urging the herd forward.

One brief look, and Teddy hung the glasses on the pommel of the saddle and turned the bronco's head downward.

"Come on!" he cried, his eyes flashing. "Ride for the honor of the X Bar X, you waddies!"

With a cheer the others started their mounts and followed Teddy down the trail, ready for the fray.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ATTACK

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact that they were eager to get at the rustlers, the X Bar X boys and the punchers were sensible enough to make their way slowly and with care down the steep declivities and slippery paths of the trail.

Although sheltered by heavy growths of trees, the snow from the recent storms had drifted in and clung tenaciously to the stones and rocks with which the trail was strewn. This made the going exceedingly dangerous. All of the party, however, were experienced riders, and the descent was accomplished without mishap.

Just before they emerged from the cover of the trees to go out on the open plain, Roy Manley, who by this time was in the lead, drew rein and waited until the others came galloping up.

“We’ve got to be careful,” he said, “and not let them lead us into a trap. We saw five men and there may be others whom we didn’t see. There are only four of us, and if there is a

crowd of those rascals, we might get licked.”

Teddy's eyes flashed fire.

“Each one of us is good for any three rustlers that ever lived!” he exclaimed fiercely.

“Wow! I could finish off five of them myself.”

“Glad you think so,” replied Roy, grinning. Then his smile faded, for he realized the gravity of the situation. “No, Ted, man for man we are as good as they are, if not better. But we've got to be cautious. Dad would never forgive me if I let any of you take unnecessary risks.”

“We won't!” chorused the two punchers and Teddy in unison.

“We'll be as foxy as old Reynard,” added Teddy, “when he's out hunting chickens. Don't you think my old hide is precious, too? I wouldn't get it shot up for the world.”

From the level of the plain and through the curtain of snow that was beginning to fall again in great, white flakes, only the dim outline of the herd could be seen. Like wraiths could be discerned the galloping broncos and the five horsemen, who were heading north with their wide-brimmed hats flattened against the wind.

“We'd better ride wide,” suggested Nick, as the party came out into the open. “If we bunch up we'll be easier to hit. But four riders coming from different angles, are likely to confuse them. Are you ready?”

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Roy's bronco leaped forward, with Teddy next, and the two punchers on the left. Slowly they spread out in fan-shape formation, and then started on a gallop straight toward the cattle thieves.

With the wind against them and the swirling snow in their faces, to keep the desired distance apart was difficult. Once Teddy nearly bumped into Roy as his bronco swerved and darted to one side. Nick and Nat were having trouble, too. They were trying to ride in a semi-circle, so as to close in on the rustlers from the east, but the newly fallen snow made the going treacherous.

Then, suddenly, as often happens in the hills, it stopped snowing, and the wind died to a whisper among the trees on the hilltops. Some distance ahead, the five rustlers could now be clearly seen, and their yells, in their endeavor to hurry the herd along, could be plainly heard.

Crack! Bang!

Nick Looker and Nat Raymond, riding hard, began firing while still at a distance.

Again their rifles spoke, and one in the crowd of rustlers was seen to drop his gun. But the cattle thieves were not of a mind to give up easily. Dismounting and forcing the broncos down, they flattened themselves upon the ground behind their horses and began to fight Indian fashion.

Zip! Whiz! Bang!

The bullets cut through the air, but the marksmanship of the rustlers was poor. Only once did they get a hit. Then a bullet zipped through Nick's hat and knocked it to the ground.

"The thieving, old rascal!" exclaimed Nick angrily, as he slipped two fresh cartridges into his rifle. "Bet that was Horseshoe Joe! Well, Mr. Joe, here's my visiting card!"

Nick fired twice, but in the excitement his usually good aim was poor and the bullets went wild.

Crack! Bang!

Roy and Teddy, who up to that time had not been within range, came racing up, firing as they leaned low upon their ponies, but evidently they did not score a hit.

One of the rustlers, who Nick had thought was Horseshoe Joe, turned his attention to the two boys, and, lying on his stomach with his rifle across the saddle of his mount, drew a bead upon Teddy.

"Drop, Ted, or he's got you!" yelled Roy. Teddy, without a question, rolled from Flash's back into the snow, and the bronco galloped away just as the rustler fired.

The bullet zipped harmlessly over the place where Teddy had been but a second before and bit into a cottonwood tree just beyond. Then

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half a dozen bullets tore through the air, humming and singing as they went by without doing any damage.

"Never touched us, you old rascal," yelled Teddy. "Gosh, but I'd like to get my hands on you! If I ever do I'll choke you. Do you hear?"

"He can't hear you! Haven't you any sense?" exclaimed Roy, who had crawled through the snow to where Teddy was lying, half shielded by the prostrate Flash whom he had pulled to the ground. Then, as a shriek of wind came from the hills, he shouted: "Gee, Ted, there comes the snow again! We'll lose them!"

With a howl and a roar as if a pack of demons had been let loose, the sudden squall descended upon the plain. It was a stinging blast of snow mixed with twigs that had been ripped from the trees by the force of the wind, and it made the boys gasp for breath as it whirled into their noses and mouths and almost blinded them.

The light faded. The low-hanging clouds and drifting snow brought a sudden dusk, through which no one could penetrate until the storm cleared.

For five minutes Roy and Teddy lay side by side, gripping each other by the arm for fear they might become separated in the swirling, blinding snow.

"It's getting lighter," shouted Teddy at last, as the snow fell less heavily, and then, as quickly as it had come, stopped completely. "Wonder where Nat and Nick are!"

"They can take care of themselves," answered Roy. "There's a rustler," as he caught sight of a dark form outlined against the snow to the left.

Crack!

A plunging bronco that showed it had been hit, a frightened rustler scrambling in the snow. Then, at last, the fellow climbed upon his mount that had suffered only a flesh wound in the flank and man and bronco hastened toward the shelter of the timber.

A sudden panic came upon the cattle thieves. They separated into two parties, and all rode furiously toward the woods that skirted the canyon to the north and soon disappeared into the forest.

"Hooray! Yip! Yip! Whoopee!"

Teddy could not contain himself. He was dancing up and down, shouting vigorously.

"Let's chase them, Roy. We'll capture the whole bunch! Come on!"

But Roy shook his head.

"Can't be done, Ted," he said. "They've got into the woods now and have every advantage. If we went after them they'd snipe us off before we could get in a shot." Then, as Nick and Nat came galloping up, looking like

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huge snowmen on white-covered charges, he added:

"We've got them scared all right, our next duty is to drive the herd back through the pass and get them out to the ranch. They'll starve if we leave them here. And there's more snow coming, I'll tell a maverick! Don't you think so, Nick?"

"Right you are!" answered Nick Looker. "While I'd like to catch those rustlers, I think we'd better get the herd on its way. Then, after we get back to the X Bar X, I'm going to ask Mr. Manley for a few days off to go hunting. You know what, Roy!"

"Bet I do," answered Roy, his eyes dancing. "Teddy and I will be with you, if Father will let us go. But come on, fellows, let's round up the herd," and Roy leaped into the saddle and started toward the mass of cattle who were milling around in the snow.

It was no easy matter to round up the herd, which had become scattered and frightened during the firing between the party from the X Bar X and the rustlers. The nerves of the boys and the punchers were on edge from the excitement.

Hidden foes seemed to lurk everywhere. A coyote barked in the brush near by and sent a sudden shiver up Teddy's spine. A couple of wolves in the forest gave their long, drawn-out howl, and Roy jumped as if they had been near

at hand. Nick and Nat were sure that they could see the forms of rustlers skulking and hiding behind the trees, and once Nat fired at a dark shape that showed itself for a moment on the edge of the woods and then disappeared.

After an hour's hard riding, the punchers and the boys succeeded in driving the herd toward the entrance of Grizzly Pass, for the second time within the past twenty-four hours. On the day previous the cattle had gone through the pass without a hitch, but this time the trip was much more arduous.

Another snowstorm had set in, and from the way it had begun it bid fair to become of gale proportions. With no trail to guide them, by which they could find the narrow opening into the pass, it was difficult and risky work to steer the herd to the proper spot.

Nat Raymond, who was riding ahead of the cattle to try to locate the entrance to the pass, was suddenly pitched forward when his bronco slipped and fell to her knees, and both horse and rider were on the ground directly in the path of the on-coming cattle.

Faster and faster they pounded, their hoofs scraping and grating on the frozen snow. It seemed as if Nat would be trodden by the thundering herd. But Nat had been in such a predicament before. With a quick jerk of the reins he pulled his bronco to its feet. A sudden leap to the saddle, a joining in the rush as the

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cattle thundered past, and Nat, safe and sound, was leading the way again to Grizzly Pass.

At the entrance to the pass, Nat drew to one side and let the steers, who were in the lead of the others, pass in. The boys and Nick had come up, and the four joined in driving the cattle into the pass.

The snow was blinding and came in great, stinging sheets, driven by the rising wind, directly into the faces of the animals and men. Halfway through the pass the storm became so bad that further progress seemed impossible. From side to side the defile was filled with a mass of milling animals, frightened by the shrieks of the wind and the beating of the snow.

To go forward seemed impossible. To turn back was out of the question. What were they to do?

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STORM

THE bellowing of the cattle, the shrill neighs of the frightened broncos, the shrieking and howling of the wind, filled the narrow pass with a bedlam of sound. The steep, rocky sides of the defile formed a natural funnel through which the snow was driven in great whirling gusts with tremendous force, and gave back echo after echo as the noise became more insistent.

The pressure of the animals against each other, as they plunged and crowded, became greater every minute. The Manley boys, who were at the back of the herd, became wedged in among them so tightly that it seemed they must be crushed and hurt. They had the presence of mind, however, to flatten themselves on the broncos' backs, and thus escape a broken or injured limb.

Nick Looker and Nat Raymond slowly worked their way through the moving mass until they came to where the X Bar X boys were hugging the side of the defile, attempting to restore order among the milling cattle.

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"We can't go on and we can't go back! What shall we do, Nick?" shouted Roy, as the puncher came alongside.

"Keep pushing!" yelled back Nick. "Once the cattle in front get clear of the pass, the others will follow quickly. They'll go helter-skelter in every direction, but that can't be helped. With those rustlers behind us, to attempt to drive them back would be suicide. Anyhow, we couldn't turn them in this narrow pass. Hold on, this can't last much longer!"

As the wind died a little for a moment, Roy and Nick heard a frightened cry from Teddy, who was slightly in advance of the two. The boy, in attempting to balance himself on the back of his bronco, had slipped on the saddle and fallen.

"Roy! I'm going down!"

But it was not humanly possible to get an inch nearer through that mass of plunging animals. Gust after gust of snow came pelting into the faces of Roy and Nick, blinding them and making it impossible to see what was going on ahead. Then came Teddy's shrill voice again.

"I'm on the back of a steer! He's trying to shake me off, but he can't! Whoopee!"

"Ride him, cowboy!" yelled back Nick encouragingly. "Don't let him down you! Stick to him, and——"

The rest of what Nick had to advise was lost

in the shrieking wind, and for several minutes the two heard nothing more from Teddy Manley.

During that time the boy was having all he could do to keep his seat on the back of the frightened steer, where he had landed when he had been forced from his mount.

The back of the steer was broad, difficult to straddle, and slippery from the frozen snow with which it was covered. Teddy edged himself on to the animal's neck and grasped the horns. If he had been in the open he would have gone off in a second. But with other steers on either side, in front, and in the rear, the animal was so tightly wedged that, although it exerted itself tremendously to dislodge the boy, its efforts to do so were not successful.

"Teddy!" shrieked Roy, forming a megaphone with his hands, an effort that almost cost him his seat on Star, who at that moment swerved suddenly at the lunge of a snorting steer.

"Teddy! Are you alive? Answer!"

There was no sound except the bellowing of the cattle, as they fought each other in their effort to push through the pass, and the noise of the wind, as it shrieked and howled in its fury.

Roy Manley's heart almost stood still. Was this to be the end of it all? he wondered. The

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happy days on the ranch with the girls and Teddy!

"Teddy!" he shouted again, straining his lungs in the attempt to make himself heard. "Teddy! Are you alive?"

Then Roy's heart leaped. Out from the swirling snow, which his eyes could not pierce, and above the shrill screech of the wind, he heard Teddy's voice. It came faintly, as if it were a long way off. But it was Teddy speaking!

"You bet I'm alive! I'm back on top of Flash! The bronc squeezed her way through and I just slid right over to her. Wow, but I'm glad to get here! That steer was bum riding!"

Roy's throat tightened as he breathed a prayer of thanksgiving because Teddy was safe. Then came the boy's voice again, this time clearer than before, as the storm lulled a little.

"It isn't so bad out here now," he shouted. "The steers at the front end must have got out of the pass, and the others are beginning to follow. Hurry up, you waddies! We've got to head them off before they run wild."

What Teddy said was true. Farther back in the pass the pressure was beginning to grow less, and before long the punchers and Roy could ride easily behind the rear of the steers. At last they came up with Teddy, who looked

like a snow man, covered from head to foot with the wet snow, and Flash, who appeared at that moment like a marble horse, with one foot poised in air, ready to fly at a moment's notice.

As he came alongside, Roy fairly hugged his brother in his joy at finding him unhurt.

"Gosh, Ted," he said feelingly, his eyes blurring, "I thought you sure were a goner that time."

"Don't pull me off the saddle, Roy. You couldn't lose little Teddy so easily. 'No siree,' as Pop Burns says." But for all Teddy's light-hearted talk, he gave Roy's hand an answering clasp and the look he turned on his brother was full of affection.

It was still snowing heavily when the Manley boys and the punchers started out of Grizzly Pass to round up the herd that had at last pushed its way through. Owing to the fright of the animals at being cooped up in the pass so long and the heavy storm which had blocked the trails, the herd had become widely separated, and it was not until after several hours' hard riding on the part of the X Bar X boys and the punchers that some semblance of order was restored. At last, however, the cattle were started on their perilous trip along the mountainside, in the direction of the first ranch where it was hoped food could be obtained for the herd.

For a mile or more the cattle kept well to-

gether, without a disposition to wander, the leaders who had, in spite of the snow and the storm, found their way out of the pass still heading the herd.

"Great little fellows, those steers," commented Nat Raymond as he rode up alongside Roy, who was acting as a guide on the left of the cavalcade. "Almost seem to know something, like the rest of us waddies. They sure keep going all right."

Roy grinned and buttoned his coat tighter around him.

"Some of the steers had to be the first ones out of the pass," he answered, "and if it hadn't been these particular ones it would have been some others. Steers are just dumb animals, all alike, if you ask me."

Nat shook his head.

"Some are dumber than others," he protested. "Had a lot of cattle on the 6 X 6 where I used to work that wouldn't have got out of that pass in a week. They just stood stock still and let the others run over them. No, sir, there's lots of difference in steers. We've got a fine lot at the X Bar X, Roy."

"Same with the punchers," laughed Roy. "Finest lot of waddies anywhere around. They can't be beat, and— Gosh, Nat, a lot of the shorthorns are straying again! Talk about dumb-bells! Come on, we've got to get them in line again."

But getting the straying animals in line was not as easy as it appeared to be. The shorthorns had apparently taken it into their heads to go off on their own account, and trotted rapidly up a steep incline that led nowhere, so the boys thought.

"Hurry up, Ted!" shouted Roy to his brother. "They'll run up against a blank rock in a minute, and then they'll turn around. We'll get them on the rebound and line them up again."

Just then there was a sudden commotion among the shorthorns, who came tumbling back in great haste and apparent fright.

A dark form leaped through the air. Then another, both landing on the back of a steer, who went down with a squeal of pain. In another moment the attackers were tearing the animal limb from limb.

"Wolves! Timber wolves!" shouted Teddy. "Let them have it, Roy!"

Crack! Crack! Bang! Bang!

Both boys fired twice, but in the whirling snow their aim was not accurate and their shots went wild. Before they had a chance to reload, the wolves had turned from their prey and were leaping forward toward Teddy and Roy with great speed.

"Beat it!" yelled Teddy frantically, as he turned Flash's head up the steep incline. Roy had turned Star as soon as he realized that

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their shots had not taken effect, and he soon outdistanced his brother up the narrow path.

The wolves, evidently surprised at the hasty departure of their foes, hesitated a moment as if undecided what to do. But the call of hunger was too great, and, giving their sharp, barking howl, they returned to the steer that they had killed and started to tear it savagely and eat it.

On and on went Star, taking the trail in long, swift leaps, trembling in fear as the scent of the wolves came to his nostrils.

"There, there, Star, old boy," said Roy soothingly, "they shan't get you. No, no, we'll beat them yet. Wow——"

Star had reached the top of the incline which slanted toward a cliff on the left. The bronco's hoofs struggled to obtain a footing, but the rock was covered with an icy film and the pony shot swiftly forward.

On the edge of the cliff it paused for a moment, its shoes striking sparks on the flinty rock. Then, with a shrill neigh of fright, Star leaped over the cliff, into space.

CHAPTER XIX

STAR'S GREAT JUMP

THROUGH the flying snow Teddy Manley caught only a brief glimpse of Star and his rider, as the two disappeared over the brink of the cliff. Phantoms of the snow they seemed, grey and indistinct, as they poised for a moment in mid-air and then shot forward into the abyss. Yet Teddy knew well that they were very real and that his beloved brother was somewhere in that whirling mass of snow and sharp jutting rocks that would break a man should he land squarely upon them.

A swirl of snow driven by the fierce wind struck Teddy in the face and almost took away his breath, as he brought Flash to a stop within a few feet of where he had seen Roy vanish so suddenly. To go on meant certain death, like that which, perhaps, had overtaken Roy, and yet he must go.

A great fear gripped him and held him in its power. A chill swept over him and his teeth chattered loudly. Suffering, such as he had never before experienced, came over him like a wave, engulfed and almost smothered him.

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To think that Roy was somewhere, near at hand, perhaps, injured and in pain, and that he, Teddy, was helpless. What could he do?

One of the first things that Bardwell Manley had taught his sons when they were old enough to be taught anything, was always to rely on themselves, especially in cases of emergency.

“Don’t always ask someone else for help,” he told them. “Think out for yourself what you ought to do, and then do it quickly. To know what to do and then to hesitate, is to be lost.”

At first it was difficult to make the boys understand this doctrine, but as they grew older they realized more and more the soundness of their father’s advice. Oftentimes it had stood them in good stead, and as Teddy Manley waited there in the blinding snow, facing the unknown—a tragedy, perhaps—he straightened his shoulders almost as if he consciously remembered his father’s words.

If anything was to be done to save Roy, he would have to do it. No one else was at hand. Where Nick Looker and Nat Raymond were, he did not know. They had become separated from the boys in that last attempt to round up the straying shorthorns. No, he, Teddy Manley, alone and unaided must save his brother if it was humanly possible. But how?

Teddy dismounted and trailed the reins over Flash’s head to keep the bronco from straying,

which it might do in the confusion of the storm. Then Teddy flattened himself on the snow and inch by inch crawled very slowly to the edge where he had seen Roy disappear.

The snow at that point had formed into a thin layer of ice. Teddy knew now why Star had slipped and shot forward at such speed. It was all that he could do, by digging his toes and fingers in the cracks in the ice, to keep himself from a like fate.

The snow and ice crunched under his weight as he edged along, which helped him a little. He could get a firmer hold with the toes of his boots when the ice was not so much like a sheet of glass. Little by little he went on until at last he came to the very edge, where to go an inch farther would be to take the fatal plunge.

Bracing himself as best he could, Teddy shouted loudly.

"Roy, are you alive? Roy! Answer me! It's Teddy!"

He listened intently, but a shriek of the wind was his only answer. It came in great howling gusts that made Teddy shiver. The snow was falling so thickly that he could not see into the gulch. A curtain of white shut out from his vision all that might lie beyond. Again he shouted.

"Roy! Are you alive?"

"Alive!"

The word sounded as if it came from the

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ravine. Teddy's heart pounded wildly. Had Roy answered? He called again and his words were flung back at him. Then he realized that it was only an echo that had resounded from the steep rocky ledge beyond.

For a minute longer he lay there wondering what he should do. Then, very slowly as before, he edged his way back from the brink of the cliff until he came to where he had left his bronco.

Flash whinnied with delight as his master appeared, and nuzzled the boy's arm with his soft nose.

"Good old Flash!" Teddy patted the bronco affectionately, and hesitated for a moment. "I've got to go down there, old boy," he said, "but I can't take you. It would be too dangerous. There must be a path that leads down there, and I'm going alone. Be back soon, I hope," he added, as the pony turned to look at him when he started down the trail.

In the heavy snow there was no path to guide him. The only way was to trust to luck and to his own care in making the perilous descent.

Breathing a heartfelt wish that he might not be too late to save his brother, Teddy Manley went on.

Even to an expert mountain climber the descent would have seemed a perilous one. There was no fear nor thought of himself in Teddy Manley's heart, however. His only dread was

that he would be too late to be of real assistance to his brother. What would that white, shrouded gulch reveal to him if he should finally traverse the decline in safety?

Teddy hesitated for just a moment as the terror of the situation gripped him again. Then he gritted his teeth hard. There must be no turning back now, whatever happened.

The sides of the ravine into which Teddy Manley was going were covered with a thick growth of pine, hemlock and oak. It was one of those short, steep cavings-away of the earth that are often found in the mountains of the West.

A landslide, or perhaps a tremendous storm of wind and rain when the waters had rushed downward, had hollowed out and eaten away the sides until they formed a funnel-like depression that was now covered deep with snow from the recent storms. The trees Teddy could see, of course; but along the windings and twistings of what might once have been a path, boulders and smaller stones were scattered, which made the descent hazardous, and the boy had to feel his way through the snow.

Often his feet slipped upon a hidden piece of ice or a snow-covered rock, and he had to catch at the overhanging branches to save himself from falling. Sliding from tree to tree and rock to rock as best he could, his progress down into the gulch was slow.

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Once Teddy fell and narrowly escaped being pitched headlong to the bottom of the ravine. He had gone but a few feet, however, when he came in contact with a snow-covered stump against which he brought up with a sharp jolt. It bruised his knee sorely, but that stump undoubtedly saved his life.

After that he went more carefully. But the boy was eager to get to the bottom of the gulch, and he determined to hurry as fast as he could, no matter what happened.

As he neared the bottom, which was not as far as he had at first imagined, Teddy saw something that caused him to stand still and gasp with wonder. A hundred feet to his left was what appeared to be an enormous snow-drift, which the wind had whipped and beaten into a great pile of white.

As Teddy approached, the drift appeared to move. It was rising upward and looked in the dim light as if some giant hand were down below, shoveling and throwing the snow on all sides. Teddy looked eagerly at the phenomenon, but just then the wind whirled a spatter of snow into his face, and his eyes blinked so that he could not see.

Then, as the gust passed and his eyes grew clear, Teddy gave a loud shout. The cause of all that commotion in the snow pile was a horse. Teddy could see it plainly now, kicking and struggling in the great, white blanket.

"Star!" he called wildly, and started toward the bronco, who had now got its head out of the drift and neighed loudly when it heard Teddy's voice.

Without a thought of his own danger, Teddy plunged straight toward the huge pile of snow that held the pony in its embrace. Suddenly he felt himself going down. The snow was up to his knees, then to his waist. It clung to him tenaciously and it seemed as though he would be pulled farther and farther into its clutches. The boy realized that he must be careful or he might share the fate of the plunging bronco.

Reaching out his hand, Teddy groped for some distance around him until he came in contact with a broken branch of a tree. This he pulled toward him, and in a few minutes he had fashioned a sort of rough shovel with which he began to dig in the snow.

The stick was not very broad at either end, and progress was slow. It served, however, as an implement with which Teddy made the snow fly, and in a short time he had dug and trampled it so that he could reach the spot where Star was now standing quietly.

As the boy approached, he caught sight of something dark that lay almost at the bronco's feet. A human form was stretched there in the snow and did not move.

For a moment Teddy's heart almost stopped beating. It was Roy! But was he dead or

alive? Teddy was almost afraid to find out. Then he took a step forward and got down on his knees in the snow.

"Roy!" he called eagerly, bending low over the prostrate boy. "Roy! It's Teddy. Can you hear me?"

A low moan came from the prostrate Roy. He moved his arms, then his eyes opened slowly, and he smiled.

"Good old Ted! I knew you'd come," he whispered. Then he tried to rise. Teddy, overjoyed at finding his brother alive, helped him to his feet.

"Say, Roy!" he exclaimed feelingly, "that was the greatest stunt you ever did. Leaped right off that ledge up there," and Teddy pointed upward, but the cliff was lost in the curtain of snow. "Golly, I thought I'd seen the last of you, sure!"

"Star and I fell right into that big bank of snow," explained Roy. "It's been piling up for a week I guess. When we struck it we went down and down, and I had one sweet time digging out so I could breathe. I was so tired that I just lay still to rest."

"Rest! You were in a faint when I first saw you!"

"Well, maybe I was. But you came and——"

"Aren't you hurt?" Teddy could hardly be-

lieve that his brother could have taken such a tumble and not be injured.

"Not much." Roy began to feel of himself carefully. "I got a nasty bump on the head and my arm's bruised, but aside from that I'm all right. Where's your bronc, Teddy?"

"I left Flash up on the ledge," explained Teddy. "We'd better go up there if we can and try to find Nick and Nat. Gosh! where do you suppose they've got to?"

"Don't know," answered Roy, as he started after Teddy, leading the bronco. "But I'll bet they're all right, wherever they are. Nat and Nick can usually look out after themselves."

It was a hard and tedious, as well as dangerous, climb. But at last the boys and the bronco were on the ledge. Teddy got Flash, and both boys mounted and started down the trail. The snow held up a little as the boys made their way cautiously along the edge of the woods.

Suddenly Teddy, who was riding ahead, reined in his mount sharply and called to his brother:

"Come, Roy! Get out of sight! Quick!"

CHAPTER XX

RUSTLERS AGAIN

THE keen eyes of Teddy Manley, which were always on the alert, had seen what Roy, his eyes on the trail, had failed to discover. Some distance away, in a circle of the woods, two dark forms that cast grey shadows on the snow had appeared for an instant.

Mounted upon horses, the shadows seemed almost like phantoms, so quickly and silently did they glide over a small open space and then into the darker background of the trees where they were lost to view.

If Teddy had not been looking in their direction just at the moment, he would not have seen them, for when Roy looked the horsemen were gone. A great sea of white stretched out to the thick mass of evergreens at the left of the trail, broken only by little spurts of snow that the dying wind kicked up here and there, with its last breath.

The boys rode their mounts into a little grove of scrub oak and both leaped from their saddles.

"What is it?" whispered Roy anxiously.

"There isn't anybody there. You must be seeing things, Ted."

"There is, too," stoutly protested Teddy, his eyes flashing with excitement. "I saw them. Two men on broncos. One of them a big fellow with a broad black hat. It was Horseshoe Joe, I'm sure."

Roy, convinced that his brother had not been dreaming, scanned carefully the place where Teddy said the men had disappeared, but even with his binoculars, he could see nothing beyond the dark trunks of the trees and the scrubby undergrowth that formed a screen behind which an enemy might successfully escape detection.

"If you say you saw them, I guess you did," said Roy slowly as he put down the glasses. "But it beats me how they got around here so quickly. The last we saw of them they were beating it for the woods at the other end of Grizzly Pass."

"Maybe there's a lower pass that we don't know about," observed Teddy. "There must be, and they came around that way to head us off. What does it mean, Roy? Are we in for a fight?"

"Don't know, but it looks as if they were not going to give up as easily as we thought," answered Roy slowly. "I think, though, they're going to lie low for a while and see what they can find out. They've probably got the idea

that we're all together, and we mustn't let them know otherwise if we can help it. I wonder what became of Nat and Nick. I wish they were here now!"

"Wish they were, too, but they're not," answered Teddy tersely. He was not one to worry about anything that plainly could not be helped. "Hope they don't run into the rustlers and give themselves away. We can't fire a signal, for if we did those rascals would hear it and catch on. What's the plan, Roy?"

Roy thought deeply for a minute before he answered. He did not jump hastily at conclusions, as Teddy sometimes did, and for that reason what he said usually carried weight.

"We've got to find out what they're up to and what they're planning to do. Also, we must get in touch with Nat and Nick, if we can without letting the rustlers know it," he said, wrinkling his forehead, which Teddy knew was a sign that his brother was concentrating deeply. "The best thing I can think of to do is to leave our broncs here and then scout around for a while. We ought to be able to go farther down the trail and then come up on the other side of that circle of trees. If we can get near enough we can probably overhear what they are talking about."

"Which will probably be us," remarked Teddy, grinning. "Wow, I hope Nat Raymond won't take it into his head to play his mouth

organ! If he starts in with 'There'll Be a Hot Time——' "

"There'll be one, all right. But we've got to take chances. And, Ted," Roy's face grew sober, "both of us are good shots!"

"Sure!"

Teddy's eyes blazed again. There was nothing that the boy liked better than the prospect of a fight, especially when it might be with the despised rustlers.

"We'll be there with both feet," went on Teddy, as he took his revolver from the holster attached to the saddle and placed it in his belt. Then, taking up the rifle, he saw that both barrels were loaded and announced that he was ready.

"I do hate to leave the bronses, though," he said. "Suppose Horseshoe Joe and the other fellow find them and make off with them?"

"It isn't likely," answered Roy. "But we've got to take a chance. Can't scout around in this weather on bronses without making a noise, and we've got to keep as quiet as a turtle."

The boys led the ponies farther into the grove, and tethered them a few feet apart. Then they broke down some branches of the overhanging hemlocks, which made a screen which effectually shielded the two bronses from view."

"Great!"

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Roy was pleased with his work and stood back looking at the mass of green, trying to see if he could detect anything beyond it.

"Remember the time at Rustlers' Gap?" he asked, grinning. "When Beauty ran away and I dressed up like a tree and got right up to him before he suspected?" he added.

"Sure do." Teddy was enthusiastic. "That was some stunt. Why couldn't we work it this time?"

Roy shook his head.

"Couldn't in this snow," he said. "It's too cumbersome. Besides, those rustlers wouldn't be as easy to fool as that bronc was. Come on. Let's start."

The boys made their way slowly down the trail to the left, over the slippery snow and ice, catching on to a tree wherever one was available, grasping low-hanging limbs the shaking of which covered them with snow, and trying to avoid as much as possible the outjutting rocks with which the mountainside was cluttered.

Once Roy stepped on a loose stone and sent it clattering down into the gulch below.

"For the love of Mike, be careful, will you, Roy? We don't want to let those waddies know we're coming. You make more noise than Bug Eye's old chariot. It's always shouting 'here I come!'"

"Sorry!" Roy realized that Teddy's nerves

were on edge and that every little sound was magnified by the echo to many times its volume. "I'll be more careful, old man, in the future. I'll try to walk like black pussy does at the ranch. You won't be able to hear——"

Crack! Snap! Pop!

Teddy had stepped on a dry limb that broke in several parts and gave the impression, in the stillness of the mountain, that fireworks were being set off.

"Take it all back, Roy!"

Teddy grinned sheepishly, as he kicked the offending limb from the path.

"Now we're quits! If those waddies don't know we're on their trail, it isn't our fault. Now, Roy, let's turn more to the left and scout back around that grove into which I saw them disappear."

"It's denser and bigger than I thought," observed Roy. "That makes it all the better. When we get there we'll have to go Indian fashion. Squirm along on our stomachs, as old Pontusuc showed us how to do."

"I'm the best little squirmer you ever saw," announced Teddy. "A snake's got nothing on me when I start wriggling. It ought to be easy on top of this snow. Wow! I'll just skid along!"

"Sh-h-h!" Roy put his finger to his lips. "Thought I saw something move just ahead. Keep your hand on your gun, Ted."

There was a slight motion a few feet away. The boys held their breath and stood ready to fire if they were attacked. Then, out of the brush sprang a rabbit, flapping its long ears, and started to run across the snow.

The boys looked at each other sheepishly and then started the ascent toward the grove, in which they hoped to catch sight of the cattle raiders.

The clump of trees, as Roy had said, covered much more space than was at first supposed. The grove was circular in shape and the trees a thick growth of low hemlocks that had become interlaced with vines and undergrowth, which formed a perfect hiding place for anyone who did not wish to be seen. Several men and horses could find refuge there without much danger of discovery.

The boys advanced slowly, but as soon as their eyes had become a little accustomed to the gloom and the murky light of the grove, they hurried forward. At first the place seemed to be deserted, but at last Teddy caught sight of something in the very center of the grove that looked like a horse. Excitedly, the boy grasped Roy by the arm.

"Sh-h-h! Roy," he whispered. "Look there! Isn't that a bronc?"

"Sure is," answered Roy eagerly, as he glimpsed a dark shadow that was outlined against the snow. "Two of them! The ras-

cals can't be far off! Flop, Teddy! It's wriggle time!"

The boys dropped to the ground and for a moment lay flat on their stomachs without moving. Then Roy, who was a little ahead of his brother, began to pull himself along by catching hold of tree trunks or stumps, or, when they were not available, by pushing himself along with both hands in the manner of rowing a boat.

Roy and Teddy Manley had been taught this method of approaching quietly any person or animal they might be stalking by an old Indian called Pontusue, who occasionally visited the X Bar X Ranch. For many an hour the two boys had wriggled along on their stomachs, at first with a great deal of effort and noise. After they had mastered the art, however, the old Indian had praised them for the quietness and speed with which they proceeded.

A gust of wind brought to the boys the odor of green smoke, and it made their eyes smart.

"They're building a fire," whispered Teddy. "Can't get it lighted, looks like. Wow, what a smudge! There they are, Roy! Two of them—Horseshoe Joe and another!"

By the faint glow of the newly kindled fire, the boys could make out the forms of two men, and a faint murmur of words came to them.

"We've got to get nearer," whispered Roy, his lips close to Teddy's ear, "if we want to

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hear what they say. Now's our time. Wriggle, Ted, as you never wriggled before!"

Slowly and very quietly, the X Bar X boys moved nearer the rustlers. Inch by inch, they crept over the icy snow, feeling their way before them in order that a cracking twig might not apprise the cattle thieves of their presence.

The two men, unsuccessful in lighting a fire with the green boughs that would stay burning, finally gave it up, and, stamping out the smoldering embers, sat down upon a rock and lighted their pipes.

The X Bar X boys made their way cautiously to the other side of that rock on which the rustlers were sitting. There they could clearly hear the conversation.

Teddy was ablaze with excitement. He could hardly contain himself, and yet, with the training that Bardwell Manley had given him, he was able to keep himself under control. Brushing Roy's ear with his lips, he whispered under his breath:

"Gosh, Roy, if only we could catch them!"

CHAPTER XXI

HORSESHOE JOE AND BLINKER

ROY MANLEY was not less excited than his younger brother at their nearness to the rustlers. It was a serious situation, however; for the slightest movement on their part might reveal them to the cattle thieves, which would mean ruin to their plans, to say nothing of danger to themselves. He put his finger to his lips to caution Teddy to be quiet, but the boy did not need to be admonished, and was listening intently.

For a few minutes after the X Bar X boys had crawled behind the rock, the rustlers sat smoking moodily without speaking. Then came a hoarse, harsh voice that the boys took to be that of Horseshoe Joe.

"Them Manley kids and their punchers thought they did a smart trick when they turned the herd through the pass again," he said. "But we'll get them yet. Wonder how many there is in the gang, Blinker."

The man addressed as Blinker took a few puffs on his pipe before he answered:

"Quite a bunch, I reckon. Bard Manley is

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a foxy old guy and he wouldn't take chances in sending out only a few. But I rather guess they got separated during the storm. I ain't worryin' none, even if three of our fellers did beat it for the tall timber. We can handle that Manley outfit by ourselves, and then some, Horseshoe."

"You bet!" replied Horseshoe Joe gruffly. "That X Bar X outfit think they're smart, but we know these woods better'n they do. Reckon they didn't think of that lower trail that we cut in on."

"Didn't know it was there," laughed Blinker. "An' we'll show 'em a few other things before we get through."

Blinker got up, knocked the ashes from his pipe, went to the outskirts of the grove and looked out.

"Not snowin' much now," he announced when he came back. "We've got to have a fire, Joe. What say we go out and get some dry sticks? This hyar green stuff won't burn, and it makes so much smoke it might give us away, anyhow."

"Now you're talkin'!" Horseshoe Joe got up slowly. He was a heavy, thick-set man of about fifty, and the boys knew him to be the moving spirit in several raids that had been made on the herds of the X Bar X and also on Peter Ball's cattle at the 8 X 8 Ranch during the past years.

"Too bad we haven't got an ax," observed Horseshoe Joe, as the two men started.

"Don't need any," said Blinker cheerfully. "There's lots of dry limbs got knocked off by the storm. Soon as we get a fire goin' we'll boil some coffee an' have a snack to eat. I'm starved."

"Me for the eats, too," agreed Horseshoe Joe, and the boys, peeping above the rock, saw the dark forms of the two men disappear down the snow-laden trail.

"Wow, we've got them dead to rights, Roy!" exclaimed Teddy excitedly. "When they come back let's hold them up, and if they get funny, we'll do some shooting."

"Nothing so crude as that, Ted," replied Roy, grinning. He never missed a chance to hold down his more exuberant brother. "Reckon they're quick on the draw, too. What we want to do is to stick around and get all the information we can from them. We ought to learn a lot when they get to talking again."

"But I want to bag them," replied Teddy in an injured tone. "Wouldn't it be great to bring them to the ranch, all trussed up? Wow!"

"We'll think about that later," laughed Roy. "I tell you what we can do, though," he added, after a minute's thought. "They have their broncs tethered back here a way. We saw them as we came up. We can drive them off and lose them. When they find it out they'll think the

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ponies just got away by themselves. Come on while the waddies are gone."

"You always use your old head, Roy," observed Teddy admiringly, as he followed his brother. "Gosh, Roy, I wish I were as smart as you are."

"Maybe you will be some day, when you get as old," answered Roy patronizingly. "You go off half-cocked too often, Ted," he added more soberly. "You ought to stop and reason things out a little first."

"I know it." Teddy was penitent. "But I would like to grab those rascals. Hurry, Roy, they may be back soon."

The boys set out swiftly toward the broncos of the cattle thieves, after first making sure that the men were not coming back, or even in sight.

The ponies were under a thick shield of hemlocks a couple of hundred yards away, and were further screened from sight by heavy undergrowth that made it an ideal place from which to abduct them. At the sight of the boys the broncos reared and snorted loudly.

"If those waddies ever hear those broncs they'll be right on our heels, and then something will happen." Teddy was worried.

"I'll fix them," said Roy, and he brought from his pocket several lumps of sugar which he gave to the delighted broncos. After that it was easy, and the two horses followed the

boys some distance along the trail in the direction opposite to that taken by the rustlers.

Behind a thick clump of scrub oak some distance from the trail, which at that point was hardly more than a path and covered in places with the drifted snow, the broncos were turned loose. Then the X Bar X boys hurried back to the grove where they had seen the cattle thieves.

The men had not returned, and the boys found places behind some thick brush where they could see and not be seen and near enough to enable them to hear what the rustlers should be saying.

Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. Still the men did not come back. Teddy began to get impatient.

"Don't suppose they caught on we were here and fooled us, do you?" he asked anxiously.

"Sh-h-h! There they are! Now freeze where you are, Ted, and keep as dumb as an oyster!"

Roy had caught sight of two dark forms toiling up the hill, their arms filled with branches, and dragging two small trees after them.

"Great hoptoads! Some pull! Gettin' old, Blinker," and Horseshoe Joe slumped down on a rock and began to wipe his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Lot of pep in the old man yet," replied Blinker, who had got his nickname from his

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habit of continually blinking his eyes. "Jest set there, Joe, and I'll have a fire lit in two minutes."

Blinker bustled around, breaking the branches into the required length and, piling them up near the edge of the grove, soon had a fire blazing.

"Now for the coffee and the eats!" he exclaimed. "Did we leave them with the bronses?"

Roy's heart leaped and little shivers galloped up and down Teddy's spine. What if they should find that the bronses were gone? Both boys wondered what would happen.

"No. Fetched them in here," replied Horseshoe Joe, much to the relief of the listening boys. "Thought we'd better not bother them bronses again to-night, they seem rather skittish-like, and ought to be quiet."

"That's right, keep 'em quiet. Now set up, Horseshoe, and pitch in. I'm as hungry as a starved coyote."

The smell of the coffee and the sight of the men eating ravenously made the boys wish that they, too, could have their supper. There was nothing to do, however, but to await developments, and the boys lay quietly watching the blinking eyes of Blinker and the dark face of Horseshoe Joe as the evil pair gulped down the steaming coffee and made several sand-

wiches disappear. No talking was done during the progress of the meal.

At last, the meal finished, the two rustlers filled their pipes again, lighted them, lay back upon a bed of pine needles, and began to talk.

"Sure you got the loot all right, Joe?" inquired Blinker in an anxious tone, keeping his eyes blinking rapidly. "Ain't lost it in the mix-up?"

"I got it right here," and Horseshoe Joe tapped his belt. "Nothing ever gets away from me, Blinker. "What's the matter? Gettin' worried for fear you won't git your share?"

Blinker blinked rapidly.

"No, not exactly," he said slowly. "But I was a wonderin' whether you let some of it fall when we were gettin' away from those X Bar X kids. You took a tumble. Thought mebbe you dropped somethin'."

"No, it's all there," growled Horseshoe. "You'll git what's comin' to you when we git to Eagles."

"We split fifty-fifty," said Blinker confidently. "That will give us both some spendin' money for the winter an'——"

Horseshoe Joe scowled and looked at Blinker fiercely.

"Fifty-fifty? Not if I know it! How do you git that way, Blinker? Me doin' all the

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work and you doin' nothin' but standin' there holdin' on to a six-shooter. Sixty-fourty, and me a takin' the big end."

Blinker blinked harder than ever.

"That ain't right," he whined. "Pards always split alike. And if I'd known that you would—"

"These pards don't," interrupted Horseshoe Joe angrily. "An' if you don't keep quiet I won't give you nothin', so shut up."

There was silence for several moments. Then Blinker began to chortle and presently burst into a hearty laugh.

"What's bitin' you?" snapped Horseshoe Joe. "Goin' dippy?"

"Jest thinkin', that's all," answered Blinker.

"Thinkin'? Must hurt you! What are you grinnin' at, you old geezer?"

"Was just thinkin'," said Blinker, "how them dames on the train acted when we held 'em up. My, but those three gals were scared out of their wits!"

"Served 'em right," growled Horseshoe. "Did you notice the pins they were wearin'?"

"No, what were they? I didn't see nothin'. You grabbed everythin' and I held the bag."

"They were X Bar X gals," said Horseshoe, an evil grin coming over his face. "Some of that Manley crowd. Wish Bard Manley had been along. I'd 'a' skinned him like an eel."

Teddy could scarcely contain himself.

"They're the waddies that robbed the train!" he whispered excitedly to Roy. "They've got the girls' jewelry and everything! We've got to——"

Blinker started and sat up straight, a scared look coming into his face.

"What was that?" he asked under his breath. "Thought I heard someone speak!"

Horseshoe Joe laughed loudly.

"It was me talkin', and no one else. What's the matter, Blinker? Nervès gettin' frazzled since you got into the holdup game?"

Blinker laughed uneasily and looked over his shoulder.

"I'd swear I heard someone, Joe. But I guess, as you say, I'm gettin' nervous. Most likely the wind."

"Most likely," assented Joe, with a grin. "Now shut up for a while, Blinker, I got to think. We want to get those cattle to-morrow, and I ain't sure how to do it."

Minutes passed. A quarter of an hour went by. Then a half ticked away, and still Horseshoe Joe never spoke. What he was thinking about and what his plans for the morrow were, Teddy and Roy wondered anxiously.

CHAPTER XXII

WOLVES

BLINKER appeared to be as anxious as the X Bar X boys to know the plans of Horseshoe Joe for the next day. He squirmed uneasily, moved from one end of the log on which he was sitting to the other, and never once took his blinking eyes from the face of the master rustler and bandit. Then, as Horseshoe Joe did not speak, Blinker got up and made his way to the edge of the grove.

It had stopped snowing and the moon was beginning to break through the clouds, giving a dim, misty light between the branches of the trees that grew thickly on the mountainside. For some time, Blinker stood looking out into the night, then he slowly started down the trail.

Teddy looked at Roy uneasily.

"Hope he doesn't find the brons are gone," whispered Teddy. "Gosh, that would spoil everything."

"He won't," decided Roy. "He's just nervous, that's all, because Horseshoe won't talk. He'll be back in a minute."

Roy was right, and in a few minutes Blinker

came back, blinking fast, and sat down on the log again. Horseshoe Joe looked at him keenly and a grin came over his dark, ugly face.

“Well, Mr. Sleuth,” he said gruffly, “what did you find? Any trace of the X Bar X outfit?”

Blinker shook his head.

“Not a thing,” he grunted. “But I’m as sure as shootin’ that I heard someone speak a while ago, like I told you. Couldn’t be any of them spyin’ around, could it?”

Horseshoe Joe laughed loudly and started to fill his pipe.

“Not a chance! Them waddies are miles away by this time and poundin’ their ears. All wore out, poor things, after a hard day’s work.”

Teddy’s eyes blazed, but, per force, he kept silent.

“They’re farther up the trail,” went on Horseshoe Joe, “and the herd is just below. I’ve figured out where they are. Easy pickin’, too, I reckon.”

“How you goin’ to get ’em, Horseshoe?” ventured Blinker eagerly, now that the other seemed to be in a more sociable mood. “That’s what’s worryin’ me. How’ll we rustle them?”

Horseshoe Joe grinned again.

“You don’t have to worry yer old bean,” he snapped. “I’m the thinkin’ part of this outfit. I know exactly——”

"Of course, of course," interrupted Blinker. "But I thought I'd just ask. No harm done, is there?" he added deprecatingly.

Horseshoe Joe was silent a minute, looking fixedly into the eyes of the blinking Blinker. Then he shifted his pipe to the other side of his mouth and leaned forward in a confidential manner.

"That herd is on the mountainside just below Rocky Point," he said. "Most likely the cattle are all spread out. I plan that just before sunup we'll get the bronses and go after it. Best way would be to split it up. I'll drive part of the herd one way and you part of 'em the other. Then when those waddies find out they're gone, they won't know which way to go. Smart idea, eh, Blinker?"

Blinker's head bobbed up and down vigorously.

"Your bean's certainly doin' some work," he said admiringly. "Ain't nobody like you, Joe, when it comes to thinkin'."

"You've said it!" Horseshoe Joe always liked to be complimented. He had a high opinion of himself as a rustler, and never allowed a chance to go by when he could impress the fact upon his followers.

"We'll start early and get the bronses," he said. "What's the matter, Blinker? Gone dippy?"

Faintly, from far away, came the long,

drawn-out howl of a wolf. Then it stopped, only to be repeated a moment later.

"Wolves!" Blinker's face grew pale.

"Well, suppose it is!" Horseshoe Joe was not alarmed. "Those fellows are a long way off, and if they do come this way, they'll get to those punchers before they do us. Ha-ha," and Horseshoe laughed harshly. "Be a good joke, wouldn't it, if the wolves did our work for us an' ate up those waddies from the X Bar X?"

Blinker, however, did not feel comfortable.

"Never did like wolves," he said slowly. "Fierce beasts to fight. Always get worried when they're around."

"It isn't the wolves that's worryin' me," said Horseshoe Joe in a sudden burst of confidence. "It's those three of our fellers that got away."

"Why, they're all right, ain't they?" asked Blinker, in surprise. "Bet they're a long way from here right this minute. They can take care of themselves."

"That's just it, Blinker," was the reply. "Them fellers can take care of themselves too well. They've got a lot of the loot from the train, Blinker. I didn't get it all. We were goin' to meet an' split up. But now those fellers have beat it, most likely I won't see 'em again."

"Leapin' lizards!" Blinker was excited.

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His eyes blinked so fast that it seemed to the watching boys that the lashes would be worn off. "That's the lay, eh? Thought you had it all!"

"Thought we'd better split it up in case we were followed by the sheriff. Then we run into that X Bar X gang and got mixed up. But they can't double-cross me," Horseshoe Joe added. "I'll get 'em and make 'em shell out, if it's the last thing I do!"

"I'll say you will!" Blinker had complete confidence in what Horseshoe Joe could do. "Say," he added, "reckon I'd better take a look at the brons and see if they're all right before we turn in. Like to get a few hours' sleep. I'm tired."

Again the boys began to get worried at what might happen should the rustlers discover that their mounts were not in the place where they had left them. But, as before, Horseshoe Joe unwittingly came to the rescue.

"Oh, leave those brons alone," he said crossly. "Haven't heard a whimper out of 'em all the evening. Keep away and let them be quiet."

"All right!" Blinker always assented to anything that his chief said. "But I reckon I'll stretch my legs a little before I turn in. Comin', Joe?"

Horseshoe Joe grunted, but rose slowly and, putting his pipe in his pocket, followed Blinker,

who had walked to the edge of the grove and then out on the trail.

As the two men disappeared in the darkness, the X Bar X boys rose from their cramped positions and stretched. Teddy's eyes were blazing with excitement.

"They're the bandits who robbed the train the girls were on, all right!" he exclaimed. "And they've got the loot—at least part of it. We've got to capture them, Roy, and get the other fellows if we can. But how shall we do it?"

"We'll wait until they come back and get sound asleep," responded Roy, no less excited than Teddy. "Then we'll crawl up and get their guns so they won't have anything to shoot with. We can hold them up all right. But I bet Horseshoe Joe will put up one grand fight. He's an ugly customer, and we've got to be careful."

"Can't beat us," replied Teddy, grinning. "Gosh, but I'm hungry! They've got some sandwiches left. I'm going to steal them, Roy. You keep your eyes peeled in case they come back."

Teddy squirmed through the brush, then out into the open space where the rustlers had been sitting. The campfire was burning low, but the boy could see the basket in which the two men kept their food. In another minute he had opened it, taken out four sandwiches, and

had started back to Roy, who was watching intently for the return of the rustlers.

"These certainly taste good, I'll tell a maverick!" exclaimed Roy. "Never was so hungry in my life! Hope they don't miss them. Sh-h-h! Here they come!"

Blinker and Horseshoe Joe came plowing through the snow and into the grove, slapping their hands and arms, as the weather was beginning to get colder.

"Br-r-r! Me for the hay!" and Blinker threw himself down on some pine boughs. "Gosh, but I'm tired!"

"No more than I am, and you don't hear me complain'," growled Horseshoe Joe. "Move over there, and don't take all the covers."

The boys listened for some time to the men's heavy breathing, and then Teddy grasped Roy by the arm.

"Let's get busy," he said. "Bet they'll be scared to death when they see us!"

"Don't be in a hurry." Roy was always cautious. "We'd better wait a little until they get dead to the world. Couldn't be fixed any better if we'd told them what to do," he added. "They've left their rifles at the edge of the grove. We can sneak in and get them without a chance of waking them up."

For half an hour the boys waited, Teddy impatient to be at the rustlers but willing to wait until Roy gave the word.

"Wonder what Curly would say if she knew we were going to get her things back," whispered Teddy. "Boy, she's some girl! And Nell, too," he added.

For once Roy did not tease his brother about Ethel Carew. He, too, had been thinking of the girls, and was wondering what Nell Willis was doing at that moment. New York seemed a long way off just then. Would he ever see Nell again? he wondered. She might never come back to the X Bar X, and——

"Snap to it, Ted," he said brusquely. "Time to get busy!"

The boys made their way quietly to the spot where the rustlers had left their guns. The two men were snoring loudly and there seemed to be no danger of their waking.

Each boy took a rifle. They found also a cartridge belt that Blinker had discarded for the night.

"We'll take the guns down the trail a piece, and hide them," whispered Roy; "so there won't be any chance of those waddies finding them if we do get into a fight."

The boys hid the rifles under a rocky ledge and were just turning to go back to the grove when Roy grasped Teddy suddenly by the arm.

"Look there, Ted!" he cried shrilly.

Several dark, grey forms whisked across the trail and past the grove where the two rustlers lay sleeping. Then came more dark forms

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from another direction. In an instant the place seemed to be swarming with wolves.

"Millions of them, Roy!" cried Teddy loudly, for in the dim light they were magnified in number and size. "They're coming from all sides! What shall we do?"

Just then some of the wolves gave their howling bark, long drawn-out and terrifying in the silence of the night.

"Shoot them, Ted, or they'll get us!" ordered Roy, bringing his rifle to his shoulder.

Crack! Bang!

The two boys fired at the same instant and their bullets found a mark in the savage mass before them. Two of the wolves dropped, and their comrades pounced upon them, snarling and howling dismally.

Then, above the noise made by the wolves, came the booming voice of Horseshoe Joe:

"It's those Manley kids! Don't let 'em get away, Blinker!"

CHAPTER XXIII

BESET ON ALL SIDES

THE sudden onslaught of the wolves and the noise of the Manley boys' rifles had rudely awakened the two rustlers from a sound sleep. Their first thought was that they were being attacked by the punchers from the X Bar X.

The campfire had burned out and the only light came from the rays of the moon that filtered in through the thick canopy of leaves and made dark, weird shadows with which the forms of the wolves mingled.

In the excitement Blinker and Horseshoe Joe bumped into one another, and each thought the other was one of the attacking party. Horseshoe Joe, quick with his fists, dealt Blinker a terrific blow on the shoulder that sent him spinning and sprawling to the ground. As he picked himself up, Blinker began to bawl loudly.

"Have a heart, pard," he blubbered. "I ain't one of 'em. It's Blinker. Don't yer know me? Gee, yer nearly killed me, hittin' like that. You've got a punch that would kill an ox, an' I thought——"

"Shut up, you fool, and get those guns!" shouted Horseshoe Joe angrily. "Where'd you leave 'em? Leapin' lizards, you're the biggest idiot I ever knowed. Hurry up and find the guns or we're done for!"

Blinker, who was trying to find the rifles, came again in contact with Horseshoe Joe's big form and ducked another blow that the angry rustler aimed at him.

"They was right by the fire," whimpered Blinker, feeling his way with his long arms and stumbling over the basket in which had been the provisions. "Right by the fire I left 'em before I turned in, and they ain't there now. Must have fell over and rolled down the trail. Can't imagine——"

Crack! Crack!

The X Bar X boys had dropped behind some rocks that formed a natural barrier against a sudden attack by the wolves and fired into the mass of moving animals that were milling around the border of the grove. The shots went wild, but they served to lash to further fury the angry animals.

The long, booming howls of the wolves, their sharp angry barks, their vicious snarls as they fought over the remains of the two that had been killed, made the mountain resound with a riotous tumult that chilled the blood of the two rustlers.

Blinker was so frightened that he could hardly speak.

"Wolves, pard," he chattered. "Ti-ti-timber wolves! They e-e-eat a man alive. It's all up-up-up with us!"

Blinker's fears were not without foundation. The timber wolf is one of the most savage of animals, especially when cornered. In cold weather, when food is scarce, they roam about in packs foraging for something to eat. Once upon the trail of cattle or a human being, they follow it to the end.

The ferocity and agility of the timber wolf, the terrible snap of its long-toothed jaws, and its tenacity in keeping to the trail until it has run down its prey makes it a formidable enemy of man and beast.

With their rifles gone and without means with which to fight, the plight of the two rustlers was not an enviable one. Horseshoe Joe was more courageous than his companion and looked with disdain at the groveling Blinker who was so terrorized that he did not know what he was doing.

"Buck up, you fool, and find a club," hissed Horseshoe Joe in Blinker's ear above the noise of the fighting wolves. "We can beat 'em off in here for a long time if we can get good, stout sticks. Here's one, and there's another," and Horseshoe Joe kicked a heavy branch to-

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ward Blinker that the men had brought in for the fire. "If a wolf makes a spring at you, hit 'im on the head."

Blinker picked up the branch and grasped it desperately.

"We can't fight the wolves and the punchers, too," he blubbered. "We'd best get to the punchers if we can an' give ourselves up. We'd be safe from the wolves, anyhow, an'——"

Horseshoe Joe struck at the man savagely, but Blinker avoided the blow by stepping quickly to one side.

"Always suspected you weren't all there, an' now I know it," said Horseshoe Joe harshly. "Can't you see what's happened?"

"No. What? The wolves——"

"The X Bar X outfit were coming to attack us, but on their way the wolves attacked them. Now that they've got their hands full to keep from bein' eaten, all we've——"

Crack! Bang!

The boys had fired again at a dark form that had been circling around the rock behind which they had taken their position. The wolf, with a cry, leaped into the air, then fell with a crash to the ground. At this the other wolves set up a louder howling and withdrew a little from the grove to fall upon the new victim.

"There, didn't I tell you?" snapped Horseshoe Joe. "Those waddies are havin' all they can do to keep from bein' eat up. Pretty soon

their ammunition will give out, and then good-night for them."

"An' what about us?" Blinker was less interested in the fate of the X Bar X boys than in what was going to happen to himself and Horseshoe Joe. "An' when they ain't got no more cartridges an' the wolves eat 'em, what will happen to us when they get through?"

"Won't anything," said Horseshoe Joe confidently. "They'll be full up and sneak off. Then you an' me will go out an' rustle those cattle an' get away with 'em. Gosh, Blinker, you're certainly a dunce."

"Don't like it, just the same," asserted Blinker defiantly. "Never did hanker after wolves. Why, once— Look, Horseshoe!"

The slim, dark form of a wolf appeared at the edge of the grove. The animal looked toward the two rustlers with glaring eyes and bared fangs. From its wide-open mouth dropped foam. For just a moment the wolf hesitated, then it started forward into the grove.

Blinker gave a yell of fright and flung his stick directly in the face of the animal. It struck the wolf a hard blow which caused it to turn tail and run from its unseen adversary.

"You blithering idiot, what'd you throw the club like that for? You might lose it. Why didn't you wait until he got nearer and then whack him on the head?"

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"Near enough to suit me," muttered Blinker, as he dropped on the ground and began to crawl toward the edge of the grove.

"For the love of Mike, what you doin' now?" Horseshoe Joe really believed that his companion had been bereft of his senses.

"Goin' after that thar stick," snapped Blinker, as he grasped the branch and began to back into the grove with it. "Might need it again. That ain't the last of those fellers who'll come in, I'll bet."

Blinker's success at keeping the wolf away for the moment had given him a spurt of courage, and he stood holding the club upraised, ready for another attack.

Meanwhile the X Bar X boys were having their hands full. The wolves had now learned that there were two parties to attack, and had divided their forces, part of them circling the grove in which were the two rustlers and the remainder trying to find an opportune moment in which to spring upon Teddy and Roy.

Several times the wolves came so close to the Manley boys that they could hear the snap of the animals' jaws. The taste of the blood of the dead wolves had served to stimulate the fury of the beasts, but they were crafty and cunning and gave the boys little chance to shoot with accuracy, for they skulked behind rocks and trees and in and out of the dark shadows.

Then, suddenly, it seemed as if the wolves had decided to make a concerted rush on the two boys from different sides. Dark forms appeared on both the right and the left of the rocks behind which Teddy and Roy were hiding. There was a fierce snarling and growling. Bright, gleaming eyes came into view, and white, bared fangs that snapped viciously.

"You take care of the right side and I'll look after the left," shouted Roy. "If they rush us, use your knife. Gosh, here they come!"

The wolves came scrambling over the rocks pell-mell, straight at the two boys.

Crack! Bang! Crack! Bang!

Four of the wolves wavered and fell back, mortally wounded, but the others kept on. There was no time to reload. It was a hand-to-hand fight.

Teddy felt the hot breath of a wolf upon his face, and struck out wildly with his rifle. The blows did no harm, but served to stop the animal for a moment, which gave the boy a chance to draw his hunting knife.

Slash! Cut! Slit!

For a moment the wolf hesitated, but no living thing could withstand the slashing blows of Teddy's knife, and it gave ground and then slunk away.

"Beat them!" Teddy was enthusiastic. "How about you, Roy? Want any help?"

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Roy, it seemed, had beaten off the animals on his side without Teddy's aid, and, barking savagely, the pack retired.

But the wolves were not to be balked of their prey so easily. They dashed around wildly for a minute, then started for the grove. The two boys had just reloaded their rifles when a fearful cry came from the two rustlers.

The wolves had made a sudden rush into the grove, and although Horseshoe Joe and Blinker wielded their clubs with all their power, they were unable to stem the onslaught.

"Help! Help! Waddies! Punchers. We ain't got no guns! They're killing us! We——"

A grey, slim form leaped upon Blinker and knocked him down, Blinker, with sudden fury, grasped the animal around the throat and fought for his life. There was a short, hard tussle, and then the rustler came off victor. The great, horny hands of Blinker had been able to squeeze the breath out of the animal, and it dropped limp and quiet at his feet.

"Help, Blinker! They're killin' me! Oh!"

Horseshoe Joe had been attacked by a huge, grey wolf that had seized the rustler by the shoulder and would not let go. Struggle as he might, Horseshoe Joe could not shake the animal off, and its cruel fangs sank deeper and deeper into the flesh. At this piercing cry, the Manley boys rushed into the grove.

Blinker, however, had apparently lost his

senses. Everyone was an enemy now, and he picked up the club and advanced threateningly as Teddy and Roy appeared.

"Put down that club, Blinker, or we'll shoot you," commanded Roy. "Quick, now! No stalling. It's two to one, and we have the guns!"

Blinker hesitated for a brief instant, then dropped the club just as there came another loud scream from Horseshoe Joe.

Crack!

Roy had drawn a bead on the big wolf and shot it through the heart. It fell without a sound, kicked, and was still.

That was the end of the attack, for a time at least, for the pack, frightened off by the stout resistance that had been put up, slunk away to a distance from the grove. Whether or not the wolves would circle in again, could not be told. But for the moment the danger was past.

Roy sprang forward and snapped on his flashlight, which he always carried.

"This man's terribly hurt," he called to Teddy. "Run to the brones, Ted, and get that first-aid kit. I'll do what I can until you get back. It's Horseshoe Joe!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LOOT

"Now you, Blinker, start that fire going again," commanded Roy Manley with authority. "We'll want some warm water as soon as we can get it. This man's in pretty bad shape, but I think I can fix him up all right until we can get him to a doctor. And don't start any funny business," he added, "or there'll be trouble," and Roy put his hand meaningly on the pistol that was in his belt.

Blinker blinked his eyes so fast that Roy wondered how he could see at all, and hastened to rebuild the campfire.

"I ain't goin' to start nothin'," he mumbled. "I know when I'm beaten, and I'm off rustlin' for life. There's nothing in it, I'll tell the world."

Just then Teddy came running back with the first-aid kit, and Roy prepared to bind up Horseshoe Joe's wounded shoulder.

"The wolves are gone," announced Teddy gleefully, "and the brons are all right and the herd is down below all bunched together

and we've got the rustlers! Did you get the loot?" he whispered to Roy anxiously.

"Not yet. We'll attend to that later." Roy smiled at his brother's enthusiasm. "Now, Ted, we've got to fix Joe up, and you'll have to lend me a hand."

"All right. What shall we do first?" Teddy was always willing.

Roy went over to where the injured rustler lay groaning and bent over him.

"We're going to bind up your shoulder now, Joe," he said. "It's in pretty bad shape, but we'll do the best we can until you can have a doctor look at it. It will hurt pretty bad, I reckon; but it's got to be done."

"Go as far as you like," replied the rustler in his hoarse, harsh voice. "I'm game, and can stand 'most anything. But first let me tell you that I suppose it's pretty white of you to do this for me. Some fellers would have gone off and left me and Blinker to shift for ourselves."

"We couldn't do that," replied Roy tersely.

With Teddy's help, Roy stripped off the coat as gently as he could, and then cut away the blood-soaked shirt and laid the wound bare. The fangs of the wolf had torn the rustler's shoulder cruelly, leaving long, ugly gashes from which the blood still oozed.

It did not take Roy many minutes to wash the wounds with the warm water that Blinker

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had heated over the fire, into which he had poured some antiseptic solution to prevent infection. Then taking several bandages from the kit, he bound up the shoulder tightly.

Through it all Horseshoe Joe did not utter a sound, although Roy knew from the beads of perspiration that stood on the rustler's forehead that the pain was great.

"That's over," Roy announced as the last bandage was strapped into place. "Now keep quiet for a while, and Teddy will make some coffee. A good, hot cup of it will do you good. Then, after you're feeling stronger, Joe, before we start for home, I want to have a few words with you."

Horseshoe Joe nodded. His face was pale and his large, ugly lips were compressed tightly.

"I will lie down for a while," he said slowly. "I'm about all in. But first," and Horseshoe Joe fumbled at his belt, "take off this belt. It ain't none too comfortable and you'll get it, anyway. It's got most of the loot from the train holdup. There's some things from the girls of the X Bar X. I recognized them by their pins. There's more," he added faintly, as Roy undid the belt and took it off. "Those other waddies have it, but they can't get away, I guess. When you find 'em you can get the rest of it."

The belt was a wide, thick one with pockets

in it. These were stuffed with the money and jewelry that the bandits had taken from the passengers when the train was held up. Roy spread one of the blankets which had covered the broncos on the ground and began to empty the loot upon it.

Teddy, watching eagerly, suddenly gave a loud cry.

"That's Curly's!" he shouted. "It's her watch and her rings. Gosh! isn't this luck, Roy? She'll be mighty glad to know we've got it back."

"And look here! Belle Ada's locket, the one she inherited from Grandma!"

"She'll be tickled to death to get that. It's really worth more to her than all the other things put together."

"And there's Nell's watch! And Belle Ada's! And Nell's pin!" exclaimed Roy, who was as excited as his brother at the finding of the stolen articles. "Everything that the girls lost and a lot of others which we'll have to turn over to the railroad company. How about the money, Ted?"

"Here's Belle Ada's purse! Curly's, too—the one I got her from the last mail-order catalogue," cried Teddy excitedly. "Reckon these waddies didn't have time to spill the money but just left it in the purses until later."

"That's right, Bo," put in Blinker, who had been watching intently. "I just held the bag

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while Joe, here, stuck 'em up. He'd hand me the loot and I'd chuck it in, and we were goin' to split up when we got to Eagles. Then Joe wanted to go on a rustle for your steers, and you fellers butted in and everything got mixed up. I guess there won't be no splittin' for us waddies."

"Reckon the next splitting you fellows do will be splitting rocks," replied Roy. "You deserve it, Blinker, you've got no kick coming. Ought to be glad you're alive."

"I am that. Thought when them wolves came pilin' in, it was all up for Horseshoe and me. But say," he added, looking sharply at Roy and blinking hard, "want to ask you waddies somethin'. Didn't one of you speak a while back while I was gabbin' with Horseshoe? I swore I heard somethin', but Horseshoe said, no."

Roy looked at Teddy and grinned.

"Yes," he said. "We've been here for a long time, listening to what you two fellows had to say, and my brother did speak to me once. Thought you were going to discover us, Blinker. You've got sharp ears, I could hardly hear him myself."

Blinker jumped to his feet, his twisted face wreathed in smiles.

"I knowed it!" he shouted. "I knowed I heard somebody speak! "Hear that, Horseshoe?" he demanded, going over to where Joe

was lying, trying to rest. "One of these waddies did speak. 'Hearin' things,' you said. Guess I'm not such a dumb-bell after all! Knowed I heard a voice. 'Hearin' things!' Not much!"

"Seven o'clock and all's well!" announced Teddy, as the sun's rays began to filter in through the trees. "Breakfast is ready! Get busy, waddies! I'm starved!"

After the meal had been eaten and Horseshoe Joe had been given an extra cup of black coffee to brace him up, Teddy went for the rustlers' broncos and brought them to the grove.

"We'll let you and Horseshoe ride on ahead," said Roy. "Not that I think you'll cut up any capers, but just to be on the safe side. We're not going to lose you, if it can be helped."

"We won't start nothin'," Blinker assured him. "Couldn't if we wanted to. Ain't got no guns. Say," he asked suddenly, "where'd those guns go to, fellers? Put 'em right by the fire, but——"

"Oh, they just walked away, down the trail a piece," laughed Teddy. "We'll get them as we go along, and maybe after you've done your stretch we'll give them back to you."

Blinker was looking at Teddy admiringly.

"Some kids, you and your brother," he said

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earnestly. "Don't believe anyone else in the world could have sneaked those guns off without being caught. Some outfit!"

Roy and Teddy decided that the first thing to be done, before an attempt was made to drive the herd to the nearest ranch, some miles away, was to find Nat Raymond and Nick Looker, from whom they had become separated during the terrific snowstorm of the day before.

The party started down the trail with Horseshoe Joe riding ahead. As Roy had said, he was going to take no chances of the rustlers' escape or of a rescue being made by his companions who had so mysteriously disappeared into the woods, the other side of Grizzly Pass.

But Horseshoe Joe had no thoughts of trying to get away. He was weak and he knew the hopelessness of combatting the X Bar X boys now. So he gave them no trouble. Slouched low in the saddle, Horseshoe Joe rode along steadily, his wounded shoulder giving him less pain, now that it was firmly bandaged.

Behind him came Blinker, eager and willing to do his part in rounding up the scattered herd before he should be handed over to the sheriff at Hawley.

The party had not been riding for more than half an hour, picking their way carefully along

the treacherous trail, when Teddy gave a sudden shout.

"Look!" he called, pointing to the left. "See that waddy over there? Is he friend or foe?"

High up on the hillside appeared a lone horseman, who stood silhouetted against the gleaming snow, dark and clear. He seemed too far away to be recognized, but Horseshoe Joe, after giving him a quick glance, turned toward the others and shook his head.

"'Tisn't one of our crowd," he said decidedly. "Know the shapes of all of 'em. Reckon it's one o' your bunch."

"It's Nick Looker!" exclaimed Teddy as the party came nearer. "Good old Nick! Hey, Nick! Here we are!" he shouted. But the distance was too great to be heard and the horseman stood sweeping the valley with his glasses, as if undecided what to do.

Bang! Bang!

Teddy fired his rifle twice in his endeavor to get Nick's attention, and in this was successful. The horseman disappeared like a shot, and in another minute the boys could see his bronco pounding swiftly down the trail.

As he came nearer another horseman appeared, and five minutes later both Nick and Nat came racing up, astonished beyond measure at seeing the boys and their prisoners.

"By the great horned spoon, you did it!"

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exclaimed Nick admiringly. "That's Horseshoe Joe, I'll bet!"

"Sure is! And that's Blinker, and we've got the loot these waddies took from the train—that is, most of it. Nell's and Curly's and Belle Ada's watches and jewelry. And we're going to get the rest of it when we catch the others and——"

Teddy was so excited that he could hardly talk straight, but the punchers did not wonder at that under the circumstances, and listened eagerly as the two boys told of the night's adventures.

"Now to get Horseshoe Joe and Blinker some place where they'll be safe," said Roy. "What's your idea, Nick?"

"Suppose Nat and I drive the herd to the 2 X 3 Ranch, which isn't far off, and buy feed for them and get them in proper shape to go home. You and Teddy make for Hawley with the prisoners. We'll round up a posse and get after those other bandits."

"You've said it!" Teddy was eager to be gone. "Come on, Horseshoe, lead the way! I bet you we'll have those other rascals rounded up before to-morrow night. Wow!"

CHAPTER XXV

CONQUERING HEROES

THE trip to Hawley—the nearest incorporated town to the X Bar X Ranch—was accomplished without adventure. The two prisoners, Horseshoe Joe and Blinker, made no trouble, but rode along docilely, with the boys following closely. It was a brilliant day after the storm, and Teddy and Roy were in high spirits at the way everything had turned out for them.

After the rustlers had been delivered to the sheriff, Blinker was led away to the county jail to await trial on the charge of cattle rustling and the more serious one of holding up and robbing the train. Horseshoe Joe was remanded to the hospital, for treatment of his wounded shoulder, and the boys, after eating a substantial meal, started for the X Bar X.

On their way they passed through Eagles and stopped for a few minutes at the railroad station to tell the ticket agent, Hank Foley, of their adventures.

“If it hadn’t been for you, Hank, we’d probably never have got on to those fellows!” ex-

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claimed Roy enthusiastically. "It was you who put us wise in the first place. Gosh, if there's any reward you ought to get some of it!"

Foley, a thin, modest little man, beamed gratefully at the boy's praise.

"Glad I could do it, boys," he said. "Mr. Manley was always a friend of mine, and anything I can do for him is a pleasure. But"—and Hank looked around furtively—"you've got only part of the gang. Horseshoe Joe was the main squeeze, and Blinker was his yes-man. But there are three others. Wish you could get them, too."

"We will." Roy was confident. "The punchers are organizing a posse to scour the woods for those fellows. Like as not they've got them by this time."

Ten miles out of Eagles and within two miles of the X Bar X, the road, which up to that point was fairly wide and well made, curved between two rocky slopes and began to narrow. On either side, interspersed with the rock formation, were thick growths of underbrush and scrub oak, which effectually screened any one who might choose to hide behind them.

The boys had just turned into this cut and were cantering along, going over again the adventures of the past twenty-four hours, when they were startled by a loud shout from the bushes.

"Stick 'em up, waddies! Reach for the sky, I tell you!"

Just before them at the right, and covering their every move, were the barrels of three black rifles that protruded from the mass of scrub oak.

"Reach for the air, and make it snappy!"

For just a moment the boys hesitated. They were not lacking in courage, but the menace of those long, black rifles that had taken them unaware was not to be denied.

"Put them up, Ted," counseled Roy, holding up his own hands. "They've got the drop on us now, whoever they are. But we'll get the best of them in the end, see if we don't!"

There was a crashing in the undergrowth, and three men came out into the road. They were dressed in the usual cowboy fashion, but had black masks over their eyes and were armed with long-barreled rifles.

The man who seemed to be the leader of the three was tall and thin, with long ungainly arms and big, warty hands which held the rifle awkwardly as if unused to the handling of such weapons.

"Get down," he commanded sullenly. "And don't start anything or you'll be sorry."

The other two men took the boys' rifles and revolvers from them, and, as Teddy and Roy dismounted, the leader sprang upon Star's back and motioned his companions to get on Flash.

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"Be better than walking, and we've done a heap of that the last couple of days," he stated grimly. "Hope you don't get footsore," he added, waving to the boys who stood looking silently at the theft of their broncos and guns. "Wait ten minutes before you start, or something might happen."

"Well," said Roy, as the boys listened to the hoof beats of the broncos that grew fainter and fainter, "that's one for them. But we nicked Horseshoe Joe and Blinker all right, and those waddies didn't search us so we've still got the girls' jewelry. Might be worse, I suppose, but, gee, I hate to lose Star! Come on, Ted, let's hoof it for home."

Crack! Crack! Bang! Bang!

Four shots rang out from behind the turn in the road. Then came a confusion of sounds—horses pounding the ground, a babel of voices, men's shouts, and a shrill cry as another shot cut through the air.

"It's the posse!" shouted Teddy shrilly. "They've got those bandits! Run, Roy! Hurry!"

The boys raced down the road which turned sharply from the narrow cut. There, a few hundred yards away, was a mingling of punchers, masked bandits and plunging broncos.

Nick Looker had telephoned from the 2 X 3 ranch house, and the posse had been recruited from the X Bar X and 8 X 8 ranches, and

were seven in number, more than ample to subdue the raiders. The leader of the bandits was sprawled on the ground holding tightly to his shattered wrist that had been struck by a rifle shot from one of the punchers. The other two rustlers were being trussed up and tied with ropes as the boys came up.

"We got 'em!" shouted Winters of the 8 X 8, running forward to greet the boys. "Did they do anything to you or Teddy?"

"Not a thing," replied Roy. "Took our brons, though. Gosh, this is great! We've got all the gang now, and these waddies ought to have the rest of the loot."

"You've said it!" sighed the smallest of the rustlers. "We'll have to shell out when you take us where we're going. We're beat. There's no use saying we're not."

"What shall we do with them, Roy?" asked Winters, who had charge of the expedition of the punchers. "Ride them to Eagles?"

"No, we'd better take them to the X Bar X, as we're so near," replied Roy. "We can lock them up in one end of the bunk house until to-morrow, then we'll take them to Hawley to join Horseshoe Joe and Blinker."

"So you nicked those fellers, did you?" asked Jones, one of the rustlers. "Always knew they were dumb-bells," he snarled.

"Almost as dumb as you are," flung back Roy. "Now start, you waddies, and make

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tracks for home, or it will be night before we all get there.”

The procession started, with the three prisoners in the center, all of them roped and tied, and the posse riding on either side, with Teddy and Roy mounted on Flash and Star as outriders.

The arrival of the boys and the posse with their prisoners created great excitement on the ranch. All the cowboys and punchers left their work and came crowding around, yelling and shouting, and congratulating everybody.

“Whoopee! Yi, Yi, Yi! Zowie! Hooray!” yelled everybody at once, and Teddy and Roy were pulled from their mounts and became the center of an admiring crowd.

“Where are Mother and Dad?” That was Roy’s first thought, and as Mrs. Manley came hurrying forward, her blue eyes shining with excitement at having the boys back again, the two of them gave her a bearlike hug.

“We got them, Dad!” shrilled Teddy, so excited that he danced up and down. “Horseshoe Joe and Blinker are in the pail at Hawley and the other three bandits are here. They’re the gang that robbed the train, and we’ve got the girls’ money and jewelry and everything! Say, it’s one great day!”

Mr. Manley was as pleased as the others, and as he looked into the sullen faces of the

prisoners, a touch of pity for these men who had gone wrong came into his heart.

"Take them down to the bunk house and lock them up," he ordered. "Don't take any chances of their getting away, for we want justice to be done, but treat them as human beings. Give them plenty to eat and a place to sleep, and to-morrow we'll turn them over to the authorities at Hawley."

The next day, when they were preparing for the trip to Hawley with the prisoners, Teddy raised a shout.

"Just look who's here!" he cried.

Far down the road could be seen the herd of cattle, driven by Nick Looker and Nat Raymond, while in the van was the snorting, kicking chariot, driven by Bug Eye, which romped and cavorted from one side of the road to the other in advance of the mild-eyed steers.

"Whoa, chariot!" shouted Bug Eye, when the car, wheezing, throwing out great clouds of greenish smoke, came up to the ranch house. "Confound yer, hold still, can't yer?"

With a loud snort the chariot started straight for the ranch-house steps, nearly reached them, then suddenly began to back. Bug Eye, pulling levers frantically, shouted a warning. Then the chariot stopped all at once with a shiver.

"That ends her for to-day!" exclaimed Bug

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Eye sadly as he climbed out. "Have to get her towed back; spark plugs busted, or something."

The Manley boys, with Nick Looker and Nat Raymond, who had brought the herd safely in, were in the living room of the ranch house consulting with Mr. Manley as to their procedure in respect to the rustlers when there arose a great commotion in the direction of the bunk house. There were shouts and squeals from Sing Lung, who came tumbling out and ran swiftly to the ranch house.

"What is it, Sing?" asked Teddy eagerly. "Those waddies trying to escape?"

"No, no! Not escape!" Sing Lung was grinning from ear to ear. "Mr. Prisoner, no likee the way Bug Eye playee the mouth organ. He pullee off boot and throw it at Bug Eye and hittee him in the jaw. Bug Eye he gettee heated on top of the collar. Some fun, I'll tellee the world!"

THE END

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